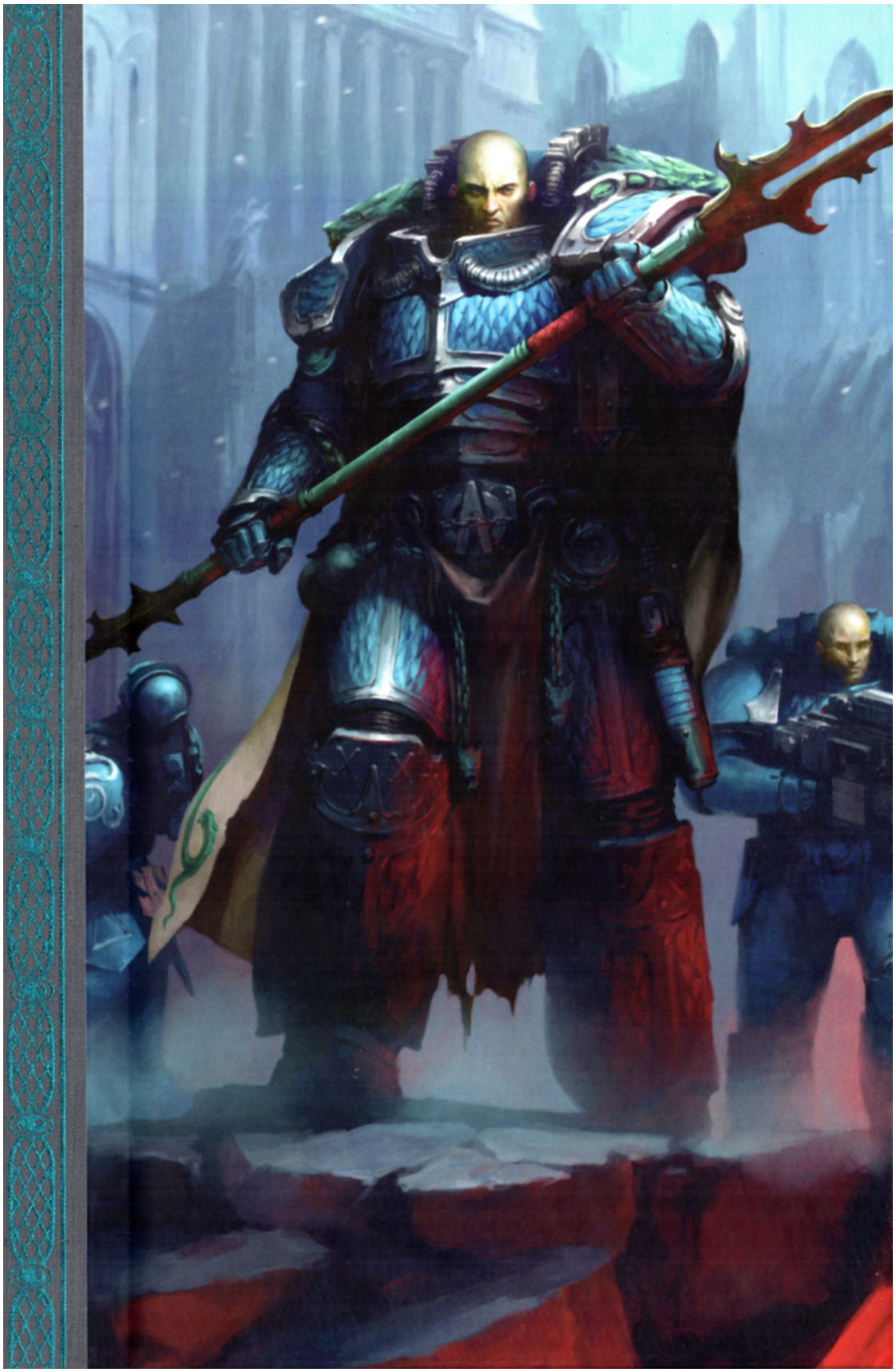
'The Horus Heresy'

PRIMARCHS

'We are not gods. We are creations of science. And herein lies our problem, for we are neither human, nor divine. We are flawed versions of both.'



THE HORUS HERESY®
PRIMARCHS

THE HORUS HERESY®

The Primarchs

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About the Author
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I could tell you who this book is for.
But it seems more fitting to leave it ambiguous.

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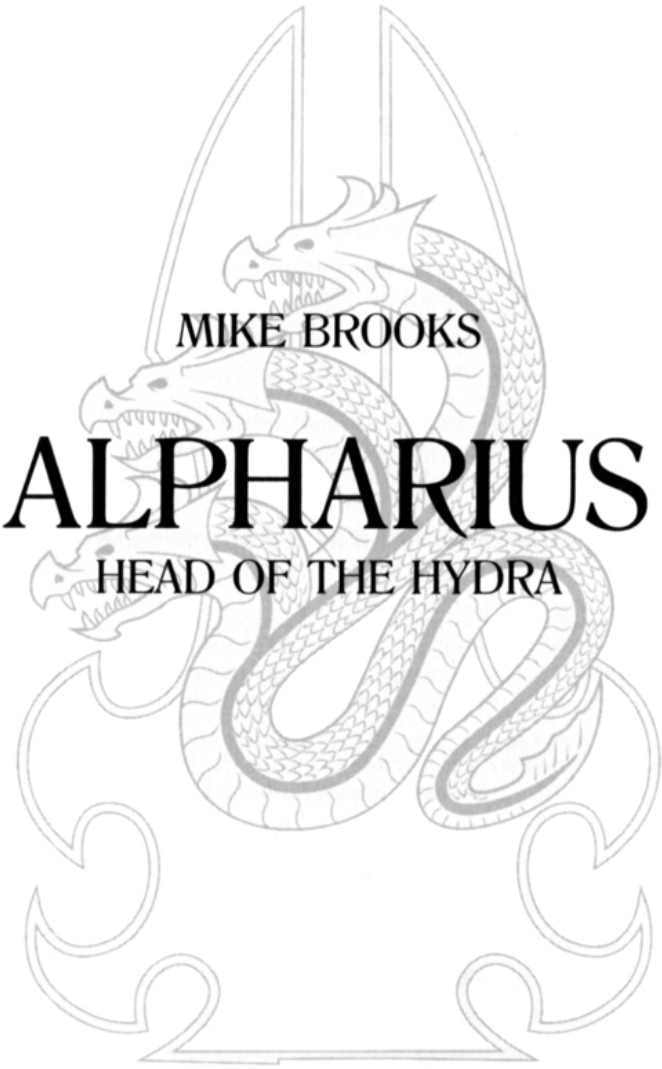
THE HORUS HERESY®
PRIMARCHS



MIKE BROOKS

ALPHARIUS

HEAD OF THE HYDRA

BLACK LIBRARY

THE HORUS HERESY

It is a time of legend.

Mighty heroes battle for the right to rule the galaxy. The vast armies of the Emperor of Mankind conquer the stars in a Great Crusade – the myriad alien races are to be smashed by his elite warriors and wiped from the face of history.

The dawn of a new age of supremacy for humanity beckons. Gleaming citadels of marble and gold celebrate the many victories of the Emperor, as system after system is brought back under his control. Triumphs are raised on a million worlds to record the epic deeds of his most powerful champions.

First and foremost amongst these are the primarchs, superhuman beings who have led the Space Marine Legions in campaign after campaign. They are unstoppable and magnificent, the pinnacle of the Emperor's genetic experimentation, while the Space Marines themselves are the mightiest human warriors the galaxy has ever known, each capable of besting a hundred normal men or more in combat.

Many are the tales told of these legendary beings. From the halls of the Imperial Palace on Terra to the outermost reaches of Ultima Segmentum, their deeds are known to be shaping the very future of the galaxy. But can such souls remain free of doubt and corruption forever? Or will the temptation of greater power prove too much for even the most loyal sons of the Emperor?

The seeds of heresy have already been sown, and the start of the greatest war in the history of mankind is but a few years away...

PROLOGUE

I am Alpharius.

This is a lie.

We wait, strung out dark and silent in the debris ring of rock and water ice that girdles the gas giant. We wait, our internal lights dimmed to minimum operational effectiveness, our sensors almost muted, our drives long since cooled so there isn't even a glimmer of heat signature to pick out against the endless cold of space. We wait, clustered around the broken wreckage of defeated enemy vessels. But they did not drift here by accident. This is bait, and our trap is set. The enemy will come again, because they must. They are driven by their culture, by their nature, by their very DNA. I know this as well as any, and better than most. The question is in what strength they will come, and therefore whether we can defeat them as we did their kin.

But this is not the question that matters to me, although none of those around me know that.

'Contact, lord.'

The officer's words are unnecessary; I'd heard the chime of her console. Nonetheless, it is good that she's alert, and the steadiness of her voice tells me she is resolute. This ship will need its crew functioning at maximum

efficiency to have a hope of surviving what is to come.

'Very well,' I say, rising to my feet. 'Let us see what they have sent us.' I am significantly taller than anyone else present, which is just one of many reasons why they acknowledge my near-divinity. For all that humanity fancies itself an evolved, sophisticated species, it is still awed by size in a manner more suited to primeval apes.

Sometimes, however, even those of us who are beyond humanity in every way - except perhaps in spirit - can be awed by it as well.

The fleet that has dropped out of the warp is substantially larger than the one we destroyed. That was a mere expeditionary force: this is a force of conquest, which now expects resistance, and is here to crush it. And there leading it is easily the largest single ship that any of those arrayed around me have ever seen.

'By all the stars,' someone breathes. 'Would you look at that...'

The *Vengeful Spirit*.

The pride of the Luna Wolves, those transhuman warriors whose ships lie wrecked around us. At least twenty kilometres long from the tip of its heavily armoured prow to its rear, where thrusters that are by themselves larger than any ship in my fleet burn furiously to propel its stentorian bulk through the void. The flagship of the one who calls himself Horus Lupercal, the greatest general and brightest star of Terra's Great Crusade.

I his was my question, and it has been answered. He is here, and with such force arrayed around him that there is no statistical chance of my flotilla triumphing.

But then, winning a space battle was never my plan. Never assume an enemy will allow you to beat them twice in the same manner.

I reach for the communication relay as the Wolves close in on where we lie in wait, undoubtedly suspecting our presence but as yet, I believe, unable to detect us.

'Fire up the drives,' 1 command. 'Prepare to engage.'

There is no hesitation, no argument. Only those with the deepest, most unshakeable faith in my divinity could have any hope we might match this force, but they all know their role nonetheless. Their best hope comes from following my orders, and they trust I will guide them through.

'Is my ship prepared?' 1 ask. I know the answer, but allowing someone to give me an affirmative is a valuable morale boost in these early moments.

Our drives and weapons systems coming online will trigger a blizzard of sensor hits in the Luna Wolves fleet. There is no going back now.

'Yes, Lord Alpharius,' Commander Semastra says, saluting. Now she hesitates, just for a moment. 'Lord... Is this truly the only way?'

I smile, to put her at her ease. 'Cut off the head, and the body will fail. So it goes with all enemies.'

'But not with us,' she says, pride visibly swelling within her. She salutes again. 'Hydra Dominatus!'

'Hydra Dominatus,' I reply, returning her salute, and move past her to head for the hangar.

It doesn't take me long. The ships of my fleet are tiny compared to those of the Imperium of Man: mainly one- and two-person fighters, with a smattering of gunboats. My flagship is barely the size of an Imperial escort craft. We triumphed before thanks to the overconfidence of our enemies, and the fact their commander was - and I say this with no arrogance, merely accuracy - no match for my tactical acumen. That is no surprise. He was merely a transhuman warrior, one amongst many hundreds of thousands. 1 am something far greater, and far rarer.

My flagship's powerful drives bring with it acceleration that cannot be properly compensated for, even by the dampeners. We strike fast, and hit as hard as our small size allows, evading the cumbersome, if deadly, ordnance of our enemies. One on one, our fighter craft are a match for theirs, and clear the way for our bombers mere transports for explosives, which are themselves unguided by anything except the kinetic force we give them. They would be hideously inaccurate at long range, but that is why we get close. The lack of guidance mechanisms means every part of the bomb is given over to destructive power. We maximise what we can, to make up for our shortcomings.

It won't be enough against Horus.

I strap myself into my personal fighter and power up the drives. Despite its status, it has no markings of rank for an enemy to target. I will be one of many, the last of my flagship's ten to launch.

1 deactivate the mag-lock holding me in place on the hangar deck, and I roar out into the void.

Stars pinwheel across my vision as I haul my fighter's nose around to bring it onto an attack vector, and aim straight for the *Vengeful Spirit*. 1 have

neither the time nor the inclination to engage in protracted dogfights with the enemy, and I do not deign to acknowledge the first sparks of fire flashing in my direction from their hastily launched fighter screen. Horus is already showing himself as more tactically aware than his lieutenant whom I defeated; but then, I would have expected nothing less.

I trigger my guns and blow the two nearest of the enemy out of the sky, then throw my drives to maximum and slip through the hole 1've just made in their defensive line. My companions engage, trying to punch a larger gap for the looming shapes of our bombers to exploit. We will make them bleed, that is for sure, but that is not how success will come today.

I soar on, avoiding the blasts of gun emplacements thanks to my reflexes, against which no mortal enemy could hope to triumph. The *Vengeful Spirit* swells larger in my viewport, a monstrous leviathan of vO1d-borne destruction, riven with deep scars which nonetheless have failed to breach its armour plate. It is capable of weathering the most terrifying damage and still coming through with the ability to crush its enemies, a characteristic and tendency it shares with the elite troops it bears.

What a primitive understanding of war.

I dive, inverting my craft so that from my perspective I now seem to be pulling up towards the enemy flagship - and what is void combat if not defined by our own perspectives? The commander who forgets that is a slave to their own limitations. The *Vengeful Spirit* cannot shoot me down. I would be surprised if Horus hasn't noticed me, but my craft poses no threat, and in any case I have angled my approach so any fire on me risks missing, and striking another of their cruisers beyond.

I am through their shields now, calibrated as they are to repel the monstrously powerful weapons of capital ships like their own. I pull out of my dive, skimming over the scarred and pitted surface of the *Vengeful Spirit*, still inverted, searching for my target.

There.

A sensor tower, up ahead. The perfect decoy. I aim my fighter for it, lock the course, and hit the ejection mechanism.

I am blasted free of my craft, and only just manage to activate the mag-damps on my armour to catch my momentum on the hull of the *Vengeful Spirit* instead of ricocheting off. A mortal could not have managed this manoeuvre; it is doubtful they'd have even survived it.

I unclip my safety harness, and the seat that boosted me here begins to drift away. Ahead of me, my fighter crashes into the sensor tower and obliterates it in a silent flower of shimmering metal debris. A suicide run, where a single pilot sacrificed their life to hurt and blind the enemy. A worthy death, although a futile one: a craft the size of the *Vengeful Spirit* has many sensor towers, and built-in redundancy.

No one, not even Horus, will notice the lone figure in scaled armour crawling across the hull of the Imperium's mighty warship. Even if they did, there is no way I could have the security codes which would allow me to open an access hatch and gain entry to the interior.

I enter the code, and the hatch releases. Within seconds I am inside. Now all that stands between me and Horus Lupercal is a warship's-worth of Imperial Navy personnel, and the elite troops of the Legiones Astartes.

I ready the long, double-bladed weapon my followers have taken to calling the Pale Spear. This should not take long.

No one on this ship, Horus included, has any idea what is coming.

PART ONE

LAST AND FIRST

DISCOVERY

I do not remember my beginning.

Even for a being as unusual and remarkable as I, there was a time before reason. Or perhaps there was not. Perhaps I knew where and what I was from the moment my form was created, but these memories were stolen from me by the forces that snatched me from the place intended to keep me safe in my infancy. All that is left to me, even now, are impressions, more than anything else: gleaming, white sterility; a glowing presence that outshone all others and left a sense of loss whenever it departed; and then noise, a jumble of colours which even I lack the vocabulary to describe, and a tapping and scratching, as of talons seeking me, that still sometimes haunts my dreams even in these last days of the 30th millennium.

My first definite, clear memory is of sitting in dust under a cloud-wracked night sky, assailed by a biting wind. I was not sure where I was, or how I had come to be there, but I knew my name. It had been whispered to me at some point, of that I was certain, and so I repeated it to myself for the first time.

'I am Alpharius.'

Some people say names have power. Mine does not. I felt no sense of

rightness or surety sweeping through my body when I spoke. My name is a tool, nothing more: an identifier, a starting baseline, to be used when convenient and discarded when not.

Then again, my name has come to have power, has it not? But that is power lent to it both by my own actions, and how it has been used as a tool by others. Taken alone, it is merely syllables. As with all such concepts, the significance they have is merely that which we confer upon them.

I knew nothing of this, however, as I sat in my first moments of lucid thought. I knew the wind lashing me was many degrees below the freezing point of water, and I could taste the artificial contaminants on it; and when I looked up, I could - even in the darkness - make out the faint colour signatures of the chemicals laced into the clouds above me. I could see mountains off to my right, high and stark, their peaks lost in cloud, but I also knew the plateau on which I sat was already at a high elevation. I could taste the thinness of the air. I did not know how I knew those things, against what criteria I was measuring them, or how that knowledge came to be with me. I simply knew them to be true.

What was also undeniably true was that I could see lights approaching from the north.

I understood that as soon as I saw them, although again, I cannot truly explain how. I realised the lights were to the north *of me,* and the mountains were to the south. I also became aware, for the first time in my life, of the concept of threat. I didn't know the purpose behind the lights, but I knew there was the possibility that those controlling them might be hostile, and so I took stock of my situation.

I was sitting next to a piece of ruined metal, which appeared to have been torn apart by violent forces. Some few lights were still blinking on arcane devices within, but the thing itself was clearly damaged beyond repair. Indeed, I could tell it was far from whole, that approximately half the material required to form its original shape was missing. The ground was chewed up around me, as though this thing had fallen from a height.

So, it fell from the sky, bearing me with it, and landed with force. Either the fall, or the impact, or both, attracted attention. Those who were approaching could be intending to assist, or to plunder.

I was small, and young. I recognised the thing next to me as the remnants of what had surrounded me, in the dim, swirling memories that were all I

had of my life before that point. I had presumably been within it for a reason, and the fact I was there, out in the open with it ruined beside me, suggested I was not yet intended to be outside it. I could be vulnerable.

I rose to my feet, and my body obeyed me as I wished it to. I scanned my surroundings for anything I could use as a weapon, but my options were limited. There were no sizeable stones in the dirt, and the ruined metal had not sheared or splintered into serviceable lengths. I caught sight of a marking as I looked it over: two sets of crossed lines, an 'XX'. This meant nothing to me at the time, so I dismissed the detail.

The lights were closing on me now, and I could hear, above the wind, the mechanical roar of an engine. More than one, in fact. It was time for me to leave this place. I could watch from nearby, and reveal myself if I determined that these arrivals were not hostile.

I scrambled out of the rut carved through the ground by my arrival, keeping low, and made for the nearest slight rise in the ground. I crested it on my belly and turned at the top, my skin pressed against the dust, and looked back at where my consciousness had begun.

Two vehicles rumbled up: large, heavy and tracked, of similar but not identical designs, with paintwork that was faded in some places and damaged in others. I recognised the work of wind-driven dust and sand, and of rust, and also of ballistic weapons.

Doors opened, and light flooded out into the darkness. Nine figures dismounted: bipedal, and shaped roughly like myself, but I knew at once they were no kin of mine. Their movements were slow and clumsy, and they were swaddled in protective clothes against the chill and, perhaps, other environmental dangers. Each of them wore goggles, and masks that were presumably intended to aid their breathing. I took an experimental breath of my own, focusing on it consciously for the first time, but although I could taste bitterness on the air, it posed me no problems.

Each of the figures also carried weapons. They looked to be crude projectile throwers, similar to those that had marked their transports, but I had not yet tested my body's resiliency or powers of recuperation, and so I remained wary. I also noted to myself that I instinctively understood the purpose of these items, in the same manner as I had understood the concept of threat, and that as I was watching them move around, I could see the angles from which someone could approach whilst remaining out of view.

My eyes tracked over the tableau, and my brain provided the context: approach from the north-west, use the rightmost vehicle as cover, move around the front end of it and take the nearest from behind. Draw their belt knife, sever their spine, push them into their neighbour, throw the knife at the one whose gait held a slight limp, seize the neighbour's weapon...

It was in those moments, on that high plateau, that I first began to understand the purpose for which I had been created.

'What in the name of all the devils is this?' one of the figures asked, bending over the wreckage. I doubt many of his companions would have been able to hear his words had they been much further away from him, but I could understand what was said even from my vantage point.

Looks like Imperial tech, the limping one replied, extending one hand cautiously. She stopped before she touched it, however, and looked up at the mountains to the south as though expecting some form of punishment to manifest.

'And you'd be an expert on Imperial tech,' the first speaker snorted.

'You ever seen anything like this before?' the second demanded.

'I don't recognise *any* of these parts.'

'If something Imperial just dropped out of the sky and crashed, they'll be on their way to pick it up,' a third speaker cut in, not without a hint of nerves in their voice. 'Either we grab it and bail, or we just bail, but we need to not be here.'

'If it was that important to them, they wouldn't have let it crash out here in the first place,' the first speaker said, but even he looked towards the mountains. His words weighed on me, though. Why *was I* here?

'I don't know,' the second speaker said uneasily, straightening and stepping back from the wreckage. 'I think it's too risky.'

'We're looking at a fortune here!' the first speaker protested.

'Are we?' The second speaker rounded on him. 'How can we junk it and sell it on when we don't even know what these components are? We'd just be painting a target on our backs for when their people come looking for their missing tech.'

I became aware of a sound. It was high-pitched, but with the ghost of power behind it.

The first speaker hefted his weapon. 'I'm not leaving it behind. Put it in the crawler.'

The sound was growing. It wasn't just high-pitched, it was *high*. I looked up, but could make out nothing through the clouds. Could they truly not hear it?

'You don't give me orders, Aberath,' the second speaker said, and although her weapon wasn't exactly aimed at the first speaker, it had drifted in his direction. 'I'm not-'

'Hey, d'you hear that?' the third speaker asked, finally looking upwards. The other half-dozen figures who'd been gathered around, apparently waiting for their leaders to make a decision, looked up too. Some readied their weapons.

The clouds parted, and a golden thunderbolt emerged.

My eyes and brain struggled to comprehend, for a moment, exactly what I was seeing. Then I managed to reframe it: a flying vehicle, ostentatiously decorated in a manner that emphasised opulence and regality, and drew attention away from the destructive power it could bring to bear. I noted the weapon pods and underslung, high-calibre guns - far superior to those toted by the would-be scavengers below - but it was not these that held my attention.

That was reserved for the glowing, gold-clad figure who leapt out of the craft and plummeted to the ground.

The scavengers were overcome. One of them, their primitive brain responding to a perceived threat, squeezed the trigger of their weapon and rattled off a few harmless shots blindly into the sky. The others simply stood motionless, their expressions hidden but their slack-limbed postures speaking of the potent mix of terror and awe that froze them in place.

The glowing figure landed, a giant amongst them, and I felt the wave of power that washed out from it. All the scavengers fell, like puppets with their strings cut.

The giant looked up at me and spoke, in a voice I heard with my mind as much as I did with my ears.

'Come out, my son.'

I could have resisted. I could have refused. It would have taken all of my will, but I could have done so. However, I had no wish to, for I recognised this figure, from my dim, confused memories of the time before, and its presence filled a void in me I had not, until that point, realised was there.

I stood up, and walked over the dust to where the glowing figure stood.

'I thought I had lost you all, it said, in tones of wonderment. Now I find you here, after all this time, on my very doorstep.' He knelt down and reached out to me. 'Let me look at you.'

I submitted myself for inspection. I do not know how else to describe it. My head was turned this way and that, but I could tell on some level that I was being examined in a manner that went far beyond the visual. A nagging sense grew in me that there was something wrong with me, that I had been damaged in some way.

'Is everything... as it should be?' I asked. There was a hesitation before the voice answered, but when it spoke, it sounded as sure and certain as stone.

'Yes. Yes, it is.'

I should have been reassured, and yet I was not. Now I thought on it, I could feel that *not* everything was as it should be. There was something missing, something I could not verbalise. I was not complete. Something had, at some point, been taken from me.

'It is a shame about these people,' the glowing giant said, looking at the limp bodies of the scavengers around us. 'But they could not be allowed to repeat what they saw here, even if they had not seen you. You are all that is left to me now. No one can know of you.'

'But what am I?' I found the courage to ask. 'And who are you?' 'I am the Emperor,' the giant replied, its voice warm. 'I am your father. As to what you are... You are my son. Do you know your name?'

I looked up at it, peering into the glow.

'I am Alpharius.'

Horus was the first of the primarchs to be recovered: he was found on Cthonia, merely three years after the Great Crusade commenced. All the records say so.

And all the records lie.

Or rather, it is fair to say the records reflect what was understood to be true by those who compiled them. Do you really think my father, the Emperor, having lost His greatest creations to the wiles of His enemies, would have celebrated the rediscovery of the first so loudly, and so triumphantly? Such a thing would be to invite attack once more, and my father might have lost the only primarch He was ever destined to find - for good, this time.

No, my father was more cunning than that. I was a stroke of luck, a lone remnant of His great work, recovered from the jaws of failure. Horus was the first indication that more of us might still live, out in the wilds of the galaxy, and so the news of Horus' existence could be risked. He became the rallying point, the glorious hope of the burgeoning Imperium: apparently the first of the Emperor's sons to be found, and destined to be the greatest and brightest of us all. That role of standard bearer is one I could never have fulfilled, but sometimes I wonder how heavily that responsibility sits on my brother's shoulders.

I watched him, of course. I watched him without him ever realising I existed. I was in no rush to reveal myself, even once Horus took his place by our father's side. I had been found relatively swiftly, you understand; all my brothers had grown to maturity or near-maturity, insofar as such a thing can be determined for beings such as us, before our father found them. We - that is to say my father, and Malcador, and Constantin Valdor, and I - did not know how their time away might have affected them. So I watched, and evaluated, and did not reveal myself.

That was my role.

But then again, this is my record. And all the records lie.

THE SIGILLITE

The Imperial Palace was still in the early stages of construction when I returned there aboard the Emperor's golden craft - and I say returned because I had indeed spent my infancy somewhere in the bowels of the mountains beneath it, although my father never showed me where, and I never found out. I was not paraded triumphantly, even though I could sense my father's fierce joy at my discovery; Instead I was hastened away to a private chamber, and told that my presence, my very existence, must be the closest-guarded secret.

'But will the crew of your ship not talk?' I asked. The Emperor shook His head.

'They will remember nothing of you.'

I accepted this. One tends to accept most things my father says. It is not a matter of His word being law, although it unquestionably is. It is more the case that His word is *truth.* You come to see that, of course, what He has said must be the case. And if it is not, by some standard of measurement, the truth, then you can be sure that steps will be taken to ensure that it *becomes* true. In such a manner does my father organise the world to His desires.

I do not think I had much in the way of expectations, to begin with, but it is fair to say I thought my father might spend time with me explaining who I was and how I had come to be. In this I was mistaken, for the Emperor was, by His very nature, often absent. Terra was yet to be fully brought into compliance, and 'compliance' was true more in theory than practice even in those areas in which it had supposedly occurred. Instead of my father, I was more often tutored by Malcador, the Sigillite.

The Wolf King, in one of his rare bouts of humour to which I have been party, once mused that Malcador was perhaps a portion of our father's soul that he had deliberately separated off to take care of boring details. I can see where Russ was coming from in this matter, for while our father is a living force whose vibrancy and glory defies all description, Malcador seems to be made of dust, as cold and as dry as that in which I had been found on the Zharinam Plateau. Whereas the Emperor's knowledge and mastery of all seems an innate part of Him, Malcador gives the impression of someone who has come by his wisdom through long study. He is a man of detail, of long and dry and boring detail.

Please note, I do not say these things to mock or minimise him. We neglect the detail at our gravest peril. Malcador is, dare I say, as essential to the Imperium as my father.

I remember the first time Malcador let himself into my quarters. We stared at each other for some time. I was weighing him up and he, I am sure, was doing the same. I concluded he intended me no harm, but I could feel the power within him. It was tightly shrouded, unlike in my father, but there nonetheless. Had I been required to kill him, I was not, at that time, certain how I would have gone about it.

'I am here to teach you,' he said at last.

I nodded, to signify my understanding and acceptance. 'What are you to teach me?'

'What do you think you should be taught?' he replied, and those

dark, sharp eyes of his were on me like a predator watching a prey animal to see in which direction it was going to flee.

This was a test.

'I am to watch and learn,' I replied. It had not been long since I had been found, but I was already growing in both body and mind. There were some texts available in my quarters, and I now had a greater understanding of my

context, and of the world outside. They had mainly brought home to me how very unusual I was. 'I am to watch, and to understand.'

'You are to watch, and to understand, and to act,' Malcador corrected me. 'You are the secret of secrets, but you are no use if you do not act.' He walked to a desk on which were arrayed playing pieces, and sat down with an exhalation. 'The Emperor has revealed Himself to the world because He must. He is visible. I am visible. Constantin Valdor is visible.' He cocked his head and regarded me with a little humour. 'Valdor does not yet know about you. See how long you can keep it that way. You may treat that as a test.'

I nodded. I had already learned of Constantin Valdor and the Legio Custodes, thanks to the information I had available. I strongly suspected there was far more to learn.

'You are not visible,' Malcador continued. 'You are... you could be... the secret shield. The sword in the darkness. The weapon our enemies do not expect, because their focus will be on us. You will do what you must to preserve what we have built, even without instruction, even if...' He trailed off, and sighed. 'This was not intended to be your destiny, but it is the hand that fate has dealt you. Has dealt us all, in fact.'

I was intrigued as to what my intended destiny had been, but I kept my silence. If Malcador did not elaborate, I could return to the subject and ask him, and then he might answer and he might not. If he kept talking, he might give me information I would not have thought to ask about.

He tapped the board instead. 'Come, sit opposite me. I'm presuming you have already familiarised yourself with the rules of this game?'

I did as he asked. 'I have. It is called regicide.'

'Simple to learn, very difficult to master,' Malcador replied. We were within a metre of each other now, and I could smell his breath, which was as sharp as his eyes. 'Or at least, that is how it is for most people. I suspect it will be a different matter for you. Let us find out.'

We played in silence.

He won.

'You are certainly not a beginner,' Malcador said appraisingly, when the game had concluded. 'Let us see what happens next time.'

We played in silence once more.

I won.

I won barely, but I won. Malcador was studying me intently now, and I got the impression he was realising for the first time exactly what I was. In this matter he knew more than me, for while I understood it was very unlikely that someone playing their second game of regicide could beat an opponent who had apparently played it many times, at that point I lacked the context for exactly what this old, very intelligent, highly dangerous man must be feeling.

His face stilled.

+Let us try once more.+

His voice was in my head. It felt similar to how I'd felt my father's voice when He'd found me, but Malcador did not speak aloud. This was a purely mental contact. If he expected this to unsettle me, however, he was to be disappointed. The first person who had ever spoken to me had done so in such a manner, at least partially, and I did not at that point understand how rare a gift it was.

We played again. This time Malcador beat me easily. I looked at him questioningly and framed a thought inside my head, putting it into distinct words.

Can you read my mind?

+Yes.+

I sat back. He tapped the board.

'Again.'

'How can I beat someone who can read my mind?' I asked. Malcador smiled.

'You understand that the two players of regicide start by being equally matched.'

'One side moves first,' I countered. 'That can be an advantage.'

'It depends on the player,' Malcador replied. 'But in terms of the forces at their disposal, they are equal.' I nodded. 'Then to win, you cannot rely on brute force. You must hide your intentions from your opponent - draw them into traps, make sacrifices to advance your plans, cause them to overextend themselves, or leave themselves vulnerable in some manner.'

I nodded again. 'Of course.'

'Most people do that through simple means,' Malcador said. 'They do not, for example, announce their next planned move. They might avoid looking at an area of the board in which they' have a particular interest. These

deceptions occur on the surface.' He leaned forwards, his eyes fixed on mine. 'You must learn to be more subtle. Your deceptions must run deep. To the wrong enemy, even your thoughts can betray you. You must master them.'

'You wish me to learn to hide my thoughts from you?' I asked.

No, Malcador replied. 'I wish you to learn to hide your thoughts from *everyone.'* He tapped the board. 'Again.'

I have a gift.

It is not necessarily a great gift, as these things go. My brother Magnus can perform feats I suspect only our father can fully comprehend, let alone better. Shadows are Corox's home in a way they will never be for me. Lorgar can stir hearts and minds with his words. Sanguinius can, of course, fly - and how I have envied him that, and not merely for the tactical advantage it can give.

Yes, we experience envy. I have watched Sanguinius soar and have wished, for a moment, that I possessed his wings. I doubt any of my brothers have envied me in the same way. But then, quite apart from the fact that they have only known me for a few years, my gift is also less obvious.

I can disappear.

Not in the manner Corax can, or, for that matter, Curze, should he wish to. I can be exceedingly stealthy when I choose to be, and I have access to certain items which can assist, but where I excel is in blending in. I cannot escape notice as such, but I can, if I try, escape recognition. I can pass as someone else, and blur the questions that might occur to the details - no mean feat, when you are such a unique being. I discovered this ability during my early days in the Imperial Palace. Without it, I would have been discovered many times over.

I was present when several of my siblings were first met by our father: often in fact, disguised as members of their own Legions. Lorgar never even blinked, he was so enraptured by the Emperor. The Lion's instincts were sharper, and I could almost feel his sense that something was not as it seemed, but he never worked out what it was - or if he did, he gave no indication. Then again, few of us are as inscrutable as the Lord of the First. It is one of the things I consider myself to have in common with him.

I was not at Angron's discovery, and I do not regret that.

NEW ARMIES, LOST BROTHERS

I played many, many games of regicide with Malcador. I grew bored of the game itself, but that swiftly became only a framework in which the new contest would play itself out: the Sigillite attempting to penetrate my thoughts, and me trying to stop him. It took some time, but in the end I was able to almost completely block him out and, therefore, regularly win our games. The rest of my time I devoted to learning, both about myself, and about the world my father and Malcador had created.

Both were spectacular.

No one in recorded history had ever managed to unify Terra. My father, the Emperor, had done so by means of the Thunder Warriors, genetically enhanced soldiers who had crushed resistance wherever they had faced it - and in so doing, had opened many other avenues for diplomacy. The threat of force could be enough to avoid conflict, but only so long as the threat was perceived as genuine. The razing of one city state might encourage a whole host of others to fall into line. Terra was still not perhaps as truly unified as the official proclamations made out, but the rightful dominance of the Imperium of Man was unchallenged by any except the most deluded or fanatical.

And as for genetically enhanced... I was astonished by what I learned of myself.

I do not know the processes used to create me. I did, however, measure myself in all ways I could against any information I could find, and discovered that I was superlative in every respect. Although still young by any standard, I was easily the size of a large human, and my growth showed no signs of slowing. My intellectual capacity defied any means of measurement or classification. My strength, my speed, my reflexes, my resilience - all surpassed any recorded human norms by a margin that was so huge as to be nearly incalculable. This was not arrogance. This was fact.

I should have been impossible. This spoke volumes of my father's abilities.

It was night when the Emperor called on me. I had seen Him and we had spoken since He'd found me, it's true, but Malcador had been my more frequent tutor.

'Come with me,' my father said, passing me a hooded robe. I put it on immediately, and drew the hood up to hide my face. There was not necessarily any obvious reason to do so - my face could not be recognised, since it had not been seen - but there was logic to everything my father did. If He had brought me a hooded robe, knowing my physiology was immune to even the freezing winds this high in the Himalazia, then it was not for my warmth.

Malcador tells me you have made significant progress with your studies, He said, as we left my quarters and began to walk through the Imperial Palace. It was still not complete, not fully, but it functioned as my father intended it to. He could rule from here, and ' was a symbol and a beacon to the entire planet.

'I like to think so,' I replied.

'Good,' my father said. 'That is important. What I am going to show you tonight is something about which you should know, but I cannot allow the information to fall into the wrong hands.'

'And what are the wrong hands?' I asked.

'Anyone whom I have not told you may know of it,' my father replied, which was an immediately obvious answer, yet not informative. It would surely make little difference if any individual petitioner or pilgrim learned of what I was to see tonight; it was who word might reach when they talked of it that doubtless concerned my father, some hostile actor who may yet

spoil His plans. I simply nodded. If He would not share that information with me, I would find it out myself. After all, my purpose was to safeguard what the Emperor and Malcador had built.

We passed through the Palace, and then beneath it. We walked through great caverns that had been given over to row after row of humans, bent over workstations. I did not look closely, but it appeared to be biology-based: possibly some form of genetics-related work. They looked up in awe as we walked past, and I could see my father's radiance reflected in their eyes, at least until they remembered themselves and went back to their tasks.

I did not use my gift. Either my father did not know of it, or He thought it unnecessary. In either case, He would have done whatever He thought appropriate for His purposes. I could understand the simple disguise I had been given. Who would look twice at this hooded figure, next to the glowing glory of the Master of Mankind?

In the last, deepest cavern, Malcador waited for us. The Sigillite stood, hooded and cloaked much as I was, but leaning on his staff. No one else was present, but I could smell the odours of the humans who had until recently been working here. I could smell other things, as well: the sharp static of electricity, the mineral tang of unguents and, faint but everywhere, a scent that was human and yet... not.

The cavern was filled with cylindrical chambers, many hundreds, perhaps several thousands. They hummed as they drew down electrical power.

I looked at my father, and at Malcador. Neither moved, or gave me any instruction, so I walked forwards and looked through the transparent observation window of the closest chamber.

It was a human. And yet... not.

He was overlarge, and the shape of his body was different: too bulky around the chest, and the shape of his ribs beneath his skin - for he was naked - was wrong. As I looked closer, I could determine other anatomical differences as well, and scars from various invasive surgeries.

'This is not a Thunder Warrior,' I said. That had been my first thought, but one I immediately realised was incorrect. The Thunder Warriors had not been engaged in any actions recently, so perhaps their numbers had fallen and needed replenishing. But Thunder Warriors were no great secret, and this man's anatomy did not match what I had learned of them.

'He is not,' my father conceded.

'They are replacements,' I concluded, stepping back and casting my eyes over the cavern. 'An improvement. The next step.'

'An improvement, and a compromise,' my father said. 'The next step, and yet a pale imitation.'

I frowned. 'I don't understand.'

'The Thunder Warriors have had their day,' the Emperor said. 'These are the Legiones Astartes, the final chapter in the work of Amar Astarte, my foremost geneticist.'

I noted that Astarte was not here. Was that because she was not to know about me, or that she was not to know about this cavern? My father had declared this to be the final chapter of her work, after all. Perhaps she too had had her day.

'I his was not her greatest work with me, however,' my father continued. He laid His hand on my shoulder. You were that.

'You, and the others like you.'

Malcador's eyes were on me, as sharp as scalpels. He had spent much time attempting to penetrate my mind and read my thoughts or my mood, but he had not given as much attention to disguising his own. I was no psyker to pluck the thoughts from his brain, but even swathed in his cloak, I could read his body language.

Malcador did not know how I was going to react to my father's words, and he was afraid.

I noted that, and contemplated it, even as I was comprehending exactly what it was I had just been told. Thank you, Malcador, for teaching me how to hold multiple thoughts in my head at once, so I could present whichever I chose to the outside world, and bury the others within.

'There are others like me?' I asked my father incredulously. I was impossible enough: for Him to have created more was a true insight into the level of His wisdom, knowledge and power.

Did Malcador fear my ego would not bear the shock of learning I was not unique? Or did he have some other reason for unease?

'There were nineteen others,' my father said softly, sadly. 'They were like you in that they were created by my hands, using the same processes, but you were not identical. You would have all stood at my side as I reunited the galaxy and brought humanity into the protection of the Imperium, but

you were taken from me. Only you returned, but by that time I had already needed to begin new plans.'

'Taken?' I asked. 'Taken by whom?' How could any hostile actor penetrate the Imperial Palace?

'By an enemy the nature of which I do not truly know,' my father said. 'What is important is that you are here now, and these,' He gestured past me, at the gestation cylinders and the Legiones Astartes within them, 'are in a sense the children of you and your lost brothers, in the same sense as you are my children.

I looked again at the cavern. 'They share our genetic material?'

'They do,' my father said. 'There will be twenty Legions - one in each of your images. Yours will be the Twentieth. They shall be my finest warriors.' He paused, breathed deeply. 'And they shall know no fear.'

You may wonder why I accepted, without question, that explanation of how my siblings and I were lost. It wasn't even really an explanation, was it? But remember what I said about how my father's word is not just law, but truth. If He tells you that something is not important, I defy you to argue with Him. I don't even know if He does it deliberately.

That is a lie. I know that He sometimes does it deliberately.

I am sure all my brothers have had similar questions about how they came to be where they ended up. I strongly doubt any got an answer more detailed than I did. I have noticed that, over time, I have become more able to hold my own thoughts against the tidal wave that is my father's will. Perhaps my brothers have experienced the same. Perhaps, one day, we will discover the truth, although I wouldn't count on it.

It is interesting, however, that we can have desires contrary to those of our father. Contrast that with, for example, Constantin Valdor. He is my father's greatest champion, and is perhaps to the Legio Custodes what my brothers and I are to the Legiones Astartes, at least in some sense. Valdor, I have come to suspect, is incapable of not doing as my father wishes: I think it is encoded somehow into his very DNA, as some part of the process that turned him from whatever he was before into whatever, exactly, he is now.

And yet my brothers and I can go against the Emperors wishes, even when

we do not intend to. If you don't believe me, go to Monarchia.

But Lorgar's folly aside, I wonder to this day what this means. Is Valdor's ingrained obedience an accident? Is it something my father could not reproduce in us (and assuredly, the process must have been different; He has, after all, never called Valdor His son)? Was this a failure on His part, or in the process of our creation? Or did He intentionally leave us with this freedom of thought, and of will? If so, is this a test?

Then I think of the purpose I was given: to protect the Imperium, without guidance if necessary. And I wonder, did my father foresee a day when He would no longer be here to guide us, and so His will could not be known? Did He even, perhaps, foresee a day when we, His creations, might surpass Him in wisdom, and so His will should no longer be adhered to?

I do not know the answer, but I relish neither of those prospects.

THE FIRST TEST

I was in the middens of northern Oz-Tralla, working as a labourer, when the forewoman approached me with two dangerous-looking men in tow. I could feel their eyes raking over me, sizing me up. They didn't get the full picture, of course - I was now the height of a Thunder Warrior, and relying on my gift to diminish myself in the eyes of observers - but they still saw a tall, powerful man, bald and olive-skinned, perhaps the result of genetical tinkering, or hormonal manipulation from a young age.

'Uzra,' Winnika the forewoman said, by way of greeting to me.

'These fellers wanna talk t'you.'

I set down my load, a large and heavy haulage container. I saw them register how easily I handled it. It wasn't a physical impossibility, by their understanding of such things, but it was impressive.

'One of our convoy guards fell ill last night,' the man on the left said. He was Adaram Synan, and the bandoliers across his chest held plentiful ammunition for the large solid-slug pistols riding on his hips. On his back he carried a mag-clamped chainblade, which appeared to have been adapted from a slaughterhouse tool rather than fashioned as a weapon originally. It perhaps looked even deadlier as a result.

I nodded to show I'd understood his words. They were not news to me: I'd poisoned the guard in question myself.

'Means we've got an opening,' said Roshan, his brother. I le wore a short-bladed power knife on his belt, and a long-barrelled las-weapon was slung across his shoulders. 'Winnika says you're strong as three men, and good at following instructions. Sounds like the sort of feller we'd need.'

I nodded again. 'What's the pay?'

'Ten Imperial a day,' Adaram said immediately.

'And where are we going?' I asked.

'Nedella, on the Rindian Plains,' Roshan replied.

I whistled softly. 'That's a long haul.' I looked up and around, as though weighing the charms of Winnika's depot. It was a refuelling station and cargo point, one of the land transport hubs for this district. Everything was falling under the sway of Imperial rule now, and the local governor had been appointed by the High Lords of Terra, but for many people, little had actually changed. Winnika's station was dusty, dirty, smelly, ugly and utterly without pretence. I actually liked it, in an odd way.

'Make it twelve a day, and we have a deal,' I told the Synan brothers. Ten was low. Twelve was more reasonable, and enough of a haggle not to raise their suspicions about me, whilst not making it likely that they'd walk away.

'You like it here that much?' Roshan sneered.

'It's honest work,' I replied levelly.

The brothers looked at each other. Then Roshan turned and passed a small pouch of coin - a finder's fee - to Winnika, and Adaram nodded to me. 'Fair play then, Uzra. Twelve a day. Be at Alpha Bay in a cycle, along with anything you're bringing. Space is limited, though.'

'I don t have much,' I told him. 'I'll be there.' I kept the small smile about their convoy's designated loading bay from my lips, lest it spark questions. I'd manipulated the electronic records regarding the assignations of bays to expected arrivals and departures more for my own amusement than anything else, but it had been good practice. Winnika hadn't noticed my intrusion into her systems, perhaps because I'd actually made things flow more smoothly. It was a valuable reminder how people rarely pay close attention to something if it appears to be functioning as it should.

Now to test that theory in more detail.

The crawlers were three massive land transports, far larger than the vehicles I had seen on the Zharinam Plateau the day my father found me. They were capable of a fair speed, too, despite their bulk, and their sheer size made them a formidable prospect for any bandits looking for easy prey. Formidable, but not impossible: that was why the Synans had been eager to replace their man, and why I was now sitting in position in a cupola, one hand on the stock of a twin-linked heavy stubber, and looking out towards the distant, dark shape of the Sumat Hills and the setting sun as the convoy ground on.

'Got movement off to the east,' Roshan's voice crackled into my ear over the headset. It was a primitive, short-ranged vox-net, but it served us well enough. *'Looks like... half a dozen vehicles, kicking up enough dust to say they're in a mighty hurry.'*

I was on the west side of my crawler, and I did not look over my shoulder. I had a job to do, after all, which was to watch my side. If these vehicles belonged to bandits, I could do nothing until they either came to our western flank, or physically boarded us. I could see, however, that my colleagues were not so disciplined. Each crawler had a defensive turret fore and aft on each side, and I was on the rear-western turret of the rearmost crawler. All down the line, the other guards craned around or got up to peer into the darkening east, trying to see what was coming our way.

It was a natural reaction. A human reaction, especially for mercenaries whose training had consisted simply of repeatedly not being someone who died. They were tough, there was no question about that, but not disciplined.

It was a trait someone with an understanding of human nature could take advantage of.

The flyers swept out of the setting sun: three of them, snub-nosed and swift, and no less deadly for the fact they were somewhat ramshackle in nature. All three together would have been no match for the sleek, golden glory of my father's craft, but neither it nor He was here. The noise of the in-wing rotors keeping them aloft was largely drowned out by the racket of our crawlers' engines, the guards were distracted by the very visible threat that had already been sighted in the east, and the flyers had the sun behind them. Had I not been there, our convoy would have been caught unaware and immobilised by their powerful weaponry, allowing the ground vehicles

to get close and pick over our bones for the valuable cargo we carried.

I had an advantage, however: I had come up with this plan, and put the bandits up to it.

The flyers swept in, thinking they had a man on the inside. I'd sought out their leader, a woman named Samarat, before I'd even made it to Oz-Tralla. I'd persuaded her this would work, citing the riches that could soon be hers. It turned out I could be quite convincing, when I wanted to. Lies trip from my tongue as easily as breathing.

I was supposed to turn my weapon on my colleagues. Instead, I aimed for the flyers.

It would have taken a near-miracle for a mortal to focus on the flyers' silhouettes and pick out a wing rotor, the only target the stubber would be able to damage without concentrated fire. Any success would only come from a fluke round, fired in desperation.

However, I was not a mortal, and my bursts of stubber fire found and dropped the first, the second...

The third fired reflexively, before it had properly targeted the crawler, just as I blew out its wing rotor too. The rocket-propelled incendiary flew over my head and exploded some way beyond my crawler, throwing up a great gout of flame and a dust cloud in what had once been the bed of an ocean, long, long ago. However, to any observer it would have looked as though they'd fired a second shot, since another explosion erupted behind me. The flyer had taken me with it, as it veered down towards its doom.

Even prepared for it as I was - for I'd rigged the explosive when my shift had begun, and I held the detonator in my hand - the concussive force still hit me harder than anything else I'd ever experienced. It barely damaged the crawler, but it knocked me clear, and even the flak jacket I wore did little to protect me from its force. My back was shredded, and aflame with agony.

My safety harness held, though. I swung down and collided with the crawler's exterior with a thud that knocked from my lungs what little breath remained in them, but I had no time to regain it. I unclipped the harness in one move and fell, landing on the narrow rim that sat above the tracks, and which prevented the dust they kicked up from obscuring the view of the guards.

Here, I nearly became undone. Such a landing would not have overly taxed me under normal circumstances, but out of breath, my head

swimming with pain, and the muscles of my back damaged, I nearly overbalanced. I only saved myself from falling off completely and landing in the dirt rushing by below by desperately reaching out and lodging my fingers into welding irregularities in the crawler's outer hull.

I panted from the exertion, but I was still not done. The forward guard on my side of the crawler, a man called Hugrid, could look back and down for me at any moment. I was counting on him staring agape for a few moments at the ruined cupola where I had been, before he thought to see if I had been caught by my safety harness. Human nature; the time it took to comprehend an event before it could be reacted to. Hugrid was only a mortal, and so I was several steps ahead of him.

I forced myself the three paces back to the rear end of the track's rim, at the very back of the crawler, then pulled two handheld mag-clamps from my belt. I reached across myself with my left arm and anchored one clamp to the curve of the crawler's corner, then launched myself off into nothing.

My back screamed in protest as I swung around in mid-air, for there was no purchase for my feet at the crawler's vertical rear. I was attached to it only by my left arm and the force of the clamp, but I held on for long enough to get the clamp in my right hand in place on the crawler's stern. I then disengaged my left hand clamp with a flick of my thumb, and brought it back around and out of sight of anyone who might have been peering over the side.

Of course, there was still the risk someone might look over the crawler's rear to see if they could somehow catch sight of my corpse in the wake of dust kicked up by the tracks, but my plan was predicated on my colleagues' focus still being on the ruined cupola, and the wreckage of the downed flyers which would seem, to them, to have come so close to taking them unawares. My back was already healing; I could feel the flesh knitting back together as my father's superlative gene-craft renewed itself, and the pain was fading. My movement was nearly back to normal as I damp-walked to the access hatch.

I'd watched the Synans operating it, and one glance had been enough to memorise the access code. I punched it in, and the hatch slid open nearly soundlessly. For all the battered dustiness of the crawlers, the Synans kept the machines on which their livelihoods depended in good condition. I swung myself inside, taking the clamps with me, and closed the hatch

behind me.

The cargo bay was stacked full of containers, and every single one was destined for the Imperial Palace. The Synans hadn't checked what they were carrying, but they knew it wasn't marked with the Imperial thunderbolts, and were wise enough not to take too close

a look. Whoever was moving secret cargo in bulk to the Imperial Palace was probably not someone they wanted to antagonise, and so they would take their pay and ask no questions.

Very wise of them. Few who have antagonised Constantin Valdor have survived for long afterwards.

I hadn't seen the Synans check these containers, since they had not done so, and so I could not have got the access code from them. I got the code from a man named Josefan Dyrrel, who had loaded them. He hadn't seen the problem with taking a reasonably sized bribe to give one man the access code to one container, which just showed that even the most meticulous schemes can fail thanks to human nature.

I killed Dyrrel after he'd given me the code. I can't say it was definitely swifter than the execution he would have received had Valdor found out, but the sort of nerve toxin that mimics fatal anaphylactic shock is surprisingly swift-acting, even if undoubtedly unpleasant to experience.

The container opened to reveal crate after crate of ammunition. Ammunition for boltguns: the deadly weapons of the Legiones Astartes, being manufactured far from the Imperial Palace and imported secretly, so the High Lords of Terra - and other, even less trustworthy individuals - gained no insight as to the new army being mustered beneath their very feet. There was very little spare space, but just enough for me to squeeze into and lie flat. I pulled the door shut behind me with a mag-clamp, and manually forced the locking bolts into place.

It would be a long time to remain unmoving in total darkness, but both my body and my mind would be equal to it. Not many could have done the same, but I was willing to wager there were some few who could have, with the right incentive, and it was them I was trying to emulate.

I closed my eyes, and let the crawler carry me towards my destination.

It might seem like a pointless charade on my part. Why construct the false identity of Uzra? Why stage the attack on the convoy, and 'Uzra's' subsequent death? Why not just board the crawler unobserved in Alpha Bay once I had the access code? Surely these were merely layers of needless complexity?

Cover.

Getting close enough to the Synans' operation, even just to observe them entering a security code, necessitated being seen. Even with my gift, I could be remembered. Once seen, my absence might be noted, and that would draw attention.

Uzra had a complete story. It didn't matter where he came from to Winnika, but it mattered where he went. He left Winnika's employ into that of the Synan brothers, and then he died in a manner and location that made it very unlikely his corpse would or could have been retrieved. The Synans were going to arrive at their destination with at least one less person than they started out with - unless they hired someone else along the way - but with the same number of people they thought they should have, based on what they understood to have happened. Winnika was not suddenly and unexpectedly missing a worker. All the numbers balanced, and so long as the numbers look right, many people will not consider that something may

be amiss.

I was going to find out if Constantin Valdor was one of those people.

THE GOLDEN DECEIT

I knew more than many about the security arrangements of the Imperial Palace, but to rely on that would have limited the usefulness of my exercise. To penetrate what I already knew was no challenge; the true test was whether I could get in using only what information could be gleaned from outside.

Goods moved towards the Imperial Palace, everyone knew that. For all the efforts at secrecy, it was possible to discover - with the correct combination of persistence, subterfuge, bribery and intimidation - that some goods were not openly marked for their destination. The Imperium already wanted to record and monitor everything; therefore it was reasonable to assume, I fell, that these goods had a secret destination. That, somewhat counter-intuitively, suggested that even though these containers might be destined for sensitive areas of the Imperial Palace, the contents would be inspected by fewer people, which made them a better candidate in which to stow away.

That is the issue with systems. If you can get inside one undetected then, once you are there, you are far less likely to be noticed.

At Nedella, the Synan brothers transferred their cargo to other, more local

contractors. The confusion of bureaucracy that was already threatening to become the hallmark of the Imperium meant it was comparatively easy for the true origin and nature of the containers to become obscured to anyone without a real patience for digging into detail. Even if the contents were discovered by those not meant to find them, they would struggle to ascertain from where, exactly, the cargo had come, and those bringing them into the palace wouldn't be able to give details. Another piece of the puzzle I'd had to decode before I could begin my operation.

I suspected Malcador. Swamping potential enemies in paperwork was his style, and making everything more complicated than it had to be in order to hide covert operations smelled like his handiwork.

It was at Nedella that my self-imposed trance broke, and I became fully aware of myself again. I would have woken at any time had there been a threat - such as the container being opened - but that had not been necessary. Now, however, I rode in the darkness, listening to the distant noise of the road and judging our ascent into the Himalazia by the time taken, the angle of the container around me and our compass heading. The routes to the Imperial Palace grow fewer and fewer the closer you get, so - having memorised them - it was easy for me to work out which road we had taken. A sharp hairpin as we followed the mountainside, the hollow roaring beneath us as we crossed a vaulted bridge - these things were sufficient landmarks for one such as I. So it was that I knew exactly when we were approaching the mighty, as-yet-incomplete Lion s Gate, and when we passed through it.

I he Imperial Palace then was far smaller than now, but still gargantuan, and the volume of traffic entering and leaving was more than any mortal mind could monitor. The cargo of which I was part had sufficient security clearance to be waved through without inspection, and delivered to its destination with no checks.

Systems, you see?

The containers were unloaded by a mag-clamped lifter, for they were too heavy and bulky to be moved by even the most augmented manual servitors. I heard the thuds and clangs as the mag-clamps connected, and felt the shuddering as the container in which I lurked was set down with uncommon care. Then the floor began to descend beneath me. I was being borne down into the warren of catacombs and chambers that honeycombed

the rock beneath the Imperial Palace. There were clearly elevator entrances hidden within the city, so as to bring in the Astartes' ordnance out of sight of those who should not know about it; that was a potential weak point which would have to be addressed.

I descended for a little over three hundred metres. Once I came to rest vertically, my container was moved again, another one hundred and fifty metres to the north-west. When this movement stopped I listened closely, pressing myself up as close to the doors as I could. The sound of other movements, the clanking and grinding of other containers being shifted into place, ceased. I heard machinery withdrawing. Then, just over a minute later, I heard the quiet cough of mighty arc lumens snuffing out, their illumination no longer needed, and the whine of powerful hydraulics followed by a metallic thud that I interpreted as a door closing.

So far as I could tell, there was no one to see if I exited the container. It was time to put that to the test.

The container was still locked, of course, and there was naturally no keypad on the inside, but the bolts holding it shut moved as easily for me now as they had when I'd shut it behind me. Then I cautiously pushed the door open and slipped out, with a thin, balanced throwing blade in my right hand.

My body responded perfectly, despite the days of inactivity. Most people's would not, but I was willing to bet there were others who could have managed a similar feat. Valdor's precautions would suffice against human foes, but it seemed foolish to assume that all our enemies would be merely human.

The storage chamber was almost completely dark, lit only by the faintest of glows from power indicators. My senses are many times sharper than those of a normal human, but even so, I would struggle in these conditions. I brought out the photo-goggles the Synans had issued to me - the better to see potential threats in the darkness - and pulled them on, bringing the chamber into green-washed clarity.

I could see no one, and nor could I hear any rasp of breathing, or smell sweat. I was alone.

I relocked the container behind me, for subterfuge demands not just concealing yourself in the present, but the traces of yourself from the past. Unfortunately, my exit from this place was not going to be so easy to

disguise. My comparatively great size ruled out squeezing through ductways or ventilation systems. I was going to have to use the door, although it galled me to do so, since I had no way of knowing if any guards were stationed outside, or whether the door activation would trigger an alert. On the other hand, if troops were rushed here to find out who was stealing the secret munitions, they'd find no one within. Even in the Imperial Palace, technological glitches were not unheard of.

I activated the door, and stepped out. The corridor was empty.

Many people attempting to penetrate Imperial security would have turned and headed further inwards, towards the Sanctum Imperialis itself. I did not do so. I headed back the way the containers had come, guided by my inherent sense of direction. One hundred and forty metres to the south-east I found another door, one which would lead me to the elevator system that had brought me down here, and thence back to the surface.

I was not, I must admit, expecting the gold-clad Custodian on the other side, who levelled his guardian spear at me in challenge.

'Identify your-'

The rest of the word was cut off as my throwing blade buried itself in his throat.

I he Legio Custodes are nothing if not resilient. The bolt caster spoke, sending a mass-reactive explosive tearing through the space where my head had been a moment before for I had swayed to my right even before my blade had left my hand.

I closed the distance on him immediately because fast though I was, I could not outmanoeuvre bolt-shells, merely the warrior firing them. He activated the powerblade of his spear at the speed of thought and brought it slashing towards me but I caught the weapon by the haft and slammed my back and hip into him.

Custodians are large, powerful warriors, bulkier even than those of the Legiones Astartes, but although this one might have slightly overtopped me in height, and bore the additional weight of his auramite armour, my strength and leverage was sufficient to throw him over my shoulder and onto his back, where he landed with a crash.

I twisted the guardian spear from his grip, inverted it, and plunged the blade down into his chest before he could react. I had no concerns that he would raise the alarm as he died: my throwing blade, buried in his larynx,

had already put paid to that.

My first kill, face to face, was one of my father's own elite guards. I did not know this warrior's name - or, since he was a Custodian, any of what would undoubtedly be a myriad of names - but he could not have anticipated finding an enemy so far beyond him in martial skill in the tunnels beneath the Imperial Palace.

Which was rather the point.

I won't deny the thrill that combat gave me. This was the first time I had tested myself against an adversary, and my reflexes and instincts were exactly as honed as I would have expected, bearing in mind the genius of the one who created me. Granted, killing a Custodian had not been in my plan - at least, not this early - but I would simply have to adapt. My intention had been to pass into the Imperial Palace and mingle with petitioners, becoming one of many. However, the dead body at my feet suggested another possible option. The Custodian was not, after all, so very different from me in terms of size.

I could become one of not-so-many, but one far less likely to be challenged. Systems, once again.

I took a risk, and the time to conceal his body inside the same ammunition container in which I had arrived. Having removed his armour, I hastily mended the fracture in it with the repair cement I found in his effects, dressed myself in it, and ascended to the surface as I'd originally planned, past the servitors stationed there. Should I choose to, I could discard this disguise and still take up the one I had intended to use. This way, however, I had more options.

Flexibility and multiple levels of redundancy, that was the key. A more rigid approach might see a plan either attempt to avoid obstacles altogether, or power through them with brute force, its eyes always set on the final goal. It's a methodology that can achieve some success, but which relies too heavily on the conditions and environment remaining predictable. Taking the obstacles with which you were presented and using them as stepping stones to increase your chances of success, however - that felt far more graceful and efficient.

I was eager to see how far my approach could get me.

There is an old Terran proverb, the origins of which are now long forgotten, about the impossibility of making a certain foodstuff without the destruction of some of the ingredients.

You might wonder why I, the Emperor's son, would so callously slay one of His chosen guards. This was, after all, a warrior whom my father had selected as one of His own, had meticulously gene-crafted, and into whom had gone considerable resources in terms of training and equipment. You might think it was not only cruel and unnecessary, but also wasteful for me to execute him whilst he was merely attempting to carry out his duty.

And this is where we differ, you and I.

Firstly, this warrior's purpose was to detect and either subdue or eliminate intruders. He was unsuccessful in his attempt to do so. He was a failure, and the fact the adversary against which he was arrayed outmatched him does not change that. If a warrior is charged with holding a position, and they fail to do so, then the quantity or quality of foes against which they were arrayed matters only for the tales that might be told about them afterwards. The Vlka Fenryka *have their skjalds sing the great songs of their heroes, but they seem to prefer glorious eventual failures to humble, efficient victors.*

Secondly, Malcador had been very clear: I would do what I must to

preserve what he and my father had built. I could not shirk from any action, no matter its apparent morality, if it was required. The blood of one loyal servant on my hands was as nothing compared to that duty.

Thirdly, I needed to make sure that I was not myself a failure. I needed to know I could act swiftly and surely, and would not flinch from violence, and I could not afford my first test to come at a moment of great importance. There is another old Terran proverb, which takes the form of a question, one that does not translate perfectly into Gothic, but which I can best render as, 'Who can truly know themselves, if they have not fought?'

That warrior and I tested each other, and where he failed, I passed.

There would always be more tests to come, of course.

THE CAPTAIN-GENERAL

I had walked through the Imperial Palace before, in disguise, or using my gift to deflect the attention of others, but I had never done so openly. Now I strode through its streets wearing the armour of the man I had killed, and marvelled at how inconspicuous a giant in gold could be.

I was noticed, naturally: only the blind could have failed to do that, and even they would have surely gathered some inkling of my appearance and location, if they had sufficient hearing to pick up on the reactions of those all around them. The Custodian Guard were known to move about in the city - Valdor himself did so - but they never became a part of the background for the tide of functionaries, servants, petitioners and labourers who rammed the streets. I was the centre of attention, and yet I was not; they merely saw the face I presented to them.

As I walked towards the Ultimate Wall, I left a trail of wonderment behind me. Some of the boldest even made a grab at the hem of my cloak, seeking to touch it tor good fortune, for had I not stood in the presence of the Emperor Himself, the Master of Mankind?

Well, yes I had. Although not in the capacity they supposed.

I kept an eye on my surroundings, always alert for the possibility of

discovery by those less likely to be awestruck by my accoutrements. I saw no other Custodians, however, and none except them would seek to challenge me. In truth, I was not certain how likely that would be in any case: the Custodes had their own duties, and I had learned from Malcador that Valdor set them individual assignments from time to time. There was nothing to say that any of my supposed fellows I might encounter would have any authority to demand my business.

All the same, I intended to avoid them if possible. I did not know the full meaning of the intricate ornamentation and decoration on a Custodian's armour, and nor would the theoretical outsider whose actions I was emulating, but I suspected it communicated something of an individual's rank and place within their organisation. I was aware of all the ranks within the human forces that garrisoned the Imperial Palace, but the Custodes were far more secretive. If I were forced to address one whilst so disguised, I risked giving myself away through my lack of knowledge. I had no wish to take another life to cover my own tracks, to say nothing of the fact that two Custodians battling on the street would be far more likely to attract attention than one death underground.

I did not believe that death had been noticed yet, since I had the fallen Custodian's micro-bead in my ear, and no alert had been raised. It was likely he had checked in after the shipment of ammunition with which I had arrived had come down the elevator, and had not been required to since. Custodians were near tireless, and one would be able to hold his post for many hours, possibly several days, without need for food, sleep or relief.

What I *was* hearing, as I switched through the Legio Custodes' private frequencies, was a series of guarded phrases. They had their own ciphers and code-speak, of course, but the Custodes were all creations of my father, as was I, and He had gifted me with an intellect somewhat in excess of theirs. It did not take me long to make sense of it, at least in basic terms.

He is coming.

There could only be one 'He' about whom the Legio Custodes were so concerned. My father was returning to the Imperial Palace from one of His secret excursions - be that to some far-flung corner of Terra, in search of ancient secrets, or even to the surface of Luna. The Emperor's timetable was not something for which I could have planned, but now I knew His return was imminent, I had to make all haste. This was the ideal opportunity, and

one which might not come again.

I picked the gun battery largely at random. Several would have suited my purposes, and I had not predetermined my target. Fluidity, again: I simply chose the one that looked the most easily approachable. The guards outside the main door looked upon me with barely disguised awe. They were of the Kushtun Naganda regiments, and might have fought alongside my father, or at least in the same conflicts He had. That could have led them to be less intimidated by a Custodian, or equally meant they had a true appreciation of what one could do. Regardless, they saluted mutely instead of challenging me as they might have done with anyone else, even their own superior officers.

'How may we serve, lord?' one of them asked, as I stared down at them from within my blank-visored, golden helm.

'Inspection,' I intoned, matching the dour, almost inhuman tones of one of the Golden Brotherhood.

They barely blinked. Did the Legio Custodes regularly perform inspections on the city's gun emplacements? Had these men experienced such checks before? It mattered not. Everyone knew the Custodes were in command of the Imperial Palace's security. To refuse such an order, even to question it, was to imply disloyalty- and to imply disloyalty was to invite the censure of a guardian spear.

'Of course, lord,' one of them said, turning and entering the access code. Behind him, the heavy security door ground open. 'Please, enter.'

I walked inside, invited into the control tower of one of the Palace's most powerful pieces of ordnance on the strength of a dead man's armour.

The commander, Meeda Ghura, was a stem-faced woman who bore the regimental markings of a veteran. She was better than most of her underlings at controlling her reaction to a Custodian, but the edges of it still bled through. She was eagerness itself to show me all the details of their work: the shift rotas, the security measures, the care and attention paid to the mighty guns' operating mechanisms and the ammunition store. I declared myself satisfied with what I'd seen, and my simple questions quite distracted my guides long enough for me to do what I intended.

'Garudo?'

That query came through my micro-bead, but wasn't answered. I nodded

my approval at Captain Ghura as she gave her final summing-up of their operation, even while I waited for a reply to the voice in my ear.

'Garudo, respond.'

Still nothing. It sounded like I had found the name of the Custodian I'd killed, and that in turn someone had noticed his absence. I informed Captain Ghura that everything was as required and took my leave of the gun emplacement, leaving behind me a small group of soldiers glowing with pride, and something that had not been there before.

Communication over the Custodes' vox-net was becoming more urgent. I tracked it as I made my way back towards the Sanctum Imperialis, my stride quicker now. Then, after a few minutes, my had, the Palace's defenders would be unlikely to assume that an intruder had taken Garudo's armour, for who would have the stature to impersonate him? If they *had* found him, and with his armour missing, it could still work to my advantage. They would think they knew how the intruder was garbed, and I could easily change that fact. For now, however, I felt the armour still served me better than abandoning it would.

amount of damage an intruder could be doing certainly one capable of killing a Custodian. I could picture the Palace's golden-clad keepers becoming more and more frenzied, like communal insects whose nest had been disturbed. An intruder who was caught was one thing how would their psyches fare when all the evidence pointed to an intruder, but none could be found? How fast would they come to the conclusion that, against what they might assume was logical, the intruder had not in fact penetrated deeper into their home, but had withdrawn? Were they even capable of dismissing a threat of which they were aware, but which they could not find? Or would they remain fixated on the internal, and so unwittingly relax their vigilance with regard to the external?

Another thought occurred to me: how many of the Custodes were privy to the ancient secrets buried deep in the rock? How far could Valdor send them? How many were cleared to know? I certainly did not know the nature of everything that lay down there, nor did I have a true notion of how far the catacombs went.

I doubted anyone did, except perhaps my father, and I was not sure even of that.

The Sanctum Imperialis loomed up as I approached it. If my father was

returning, He would be doing so in a shuttle or flyer He lacked the patience for a ground procession across the whole expanse of the Palace's grounds, where His transport would be understood the power of symbolism - He would hardly have armoured Himself and His Custodians in gold, otherwise - even while He strove to ensure that He was never misrepresented as a deity. However, the one thing my father could not bring wholly under His dominion was time. It was shortage of time, and an eagerness to press on with the next stage of His plans, that caused Him to avoid the crowds of His subjects.

If a shuttle or flyer was inbound, I knew where it would come down. Luckily, I was garbed in such a manner as to have an excellent chance of getting there.

To say the Sanctum Imperialis was in turmoil would be unfair, but to someone who had often walked its vaulted halls, the difference was obvious. Custodians moved at speed, and their scrutiny of their brothers lacked a little of its usual vigilance. I penetrated the exterior security by hurrying past the sentries as though I had been summoned within on a matter of urgency, and I was not challenged. However, once inside I discarded the armour, for I suspected that the majority of such forces would be summoned to the catacombs, and climbing to a high vantage point would mark me out. Also, the more time elapsed, the more likely it was that Garudo's body would be found stripped of its armour, at which point the parameters of the Custodes' vigilance would change. Auramite provided a fine disguise when no one suspected it, but now shadows and corners would be my friends once more.

The dust-cloak I'd worn atop the Synans' crawler obscured the guardian spear I still bore, and my own frame was concealed by a cameleoline cloak. It had originally been a tarpaulin made of the same material, such as might be used to conceal a vehicle. I had purchased it from a manufacturer of such goods not far from Winnika's depot, then cut it down to size. Better to do that than order a bespoke cloak of a size far larger than required by a normal human frame. Such a novelty might spark comment from its maker, no matter how well they were paid not to speak of the purchase to others.

I was in position, atop the spine of an angled roof and looking down at the landing pad, when the clouds above me began to part to reveal the craft

descending towards the heart of all humanity It was not the same golden flyer that had borne my father to me on the night of my rediscovery, but the memory hit me hard nonetheless. As I watched it descend, I reached into one of my pouches for a small device, and toyed with it between my fingers.

It was perhaps in that moment, as my first independently conceived plan coalesced, that I first felt truly alive.

The shuttle drew closer, firing retros to slow its descent and flanked by two atmospheric fighter craft. The heat from the jets further blackened the shuttle's already scorched underside as it manoeuvred smoothly down towards the landing pad. There would be a Custodian behind the controls, and it was possible they might see me, but I was tucked in under an overhang and my cameleoline cloak was enabling me to blend in almost seamlessly with my background. It was possible, but it was not likely. Weighing the odds of success and choosing the best; that was how I had come to be here.

The shuttle touched down, accompanied by clarion calls of silver trumpets as the assembled greeting party welcomed the arrival of the Master of Mankind. The ramp lowered, and gold-clad giants descended, their weapons ready for any threat, even here at the heart of the Imperium's power. And following them...

The Custodians were gold-clad, but He was golden. They were giants, He was titanic: but more in aura than in stature, more in spirit than in body. The Emperor, my father, descended from His shuttle back to the planet that had birthed Him — had birthed all of us - and the greeting party fell to its knees.

I began to remove the cloak from around the guardian spear. It would be a long shot for the bolt caster set behind the blade, but I was confident in my accuracy. Such a weapon could not truly harm my father, but it would provide the wake-up call the Palace's defenders so desperately needed.

Whatever was necessary. Even if that required firing on the Emperor Himself.

He strode forward, a vision of power and glory. He would be greeted by Malcador, stood there with his hood thrown back, and Constantin Valdor-

Malcador's head snapped around so sharply I thought for a moment he would break his own neck, and his eyes found me, perched in my vantage point behind my cameleoline. I had not told either him or my father where I

was going, or what I intended; indeed, I had deliberately been shielding my thoughts from him. Perhaps, as the fierce pride of my triumph had surged within me, I had revealed myself?

I realised Valdor was not present with the welcoming party a moment before instinct made me throw myself forwards, and the sizzling powerblade of the Apollonian Spear sliced through the overhang under which I'd been sheltering.

I came back up to my feet, balancing on the spine of the roof, and Constantin Valdor came at me like a golden thunderstorm, with the Apollonian Spear its tongues of lightning. Despite his size, despite the bulk of his armour, he moved as smoothly as a dancer along the narrow ridge. He was the Emperor's greatest champion, Terra's mightiest warrior, and peerless in combat.

So far.

The guardian spear I held was not manufactured to the same standards as my adversary's weapon, but neither was it a feeble twig. I met him blade to blade, countering and parrying each of his thrusts, then responded in kind. Me matched me, his guard as good as my own, then knocked my blade aside and thrust for my heart. It was a killing blow.

I somersaulted over it, clearing Valdor and lashing out with my spear at his back as I did so. I expected his suit of superbly crafted auramite to turn the blow, at least enough to avoid him taking serious harm. I did not expect him to be able to withdraw the Apollonian Spear from his thrust in time to parry my slash, and then turn to face me as I landed on my feet, facing him in turn.

I smiled then, for this was *truly* a test.

+Cease this! +

Malcador's voice echoed in my head. I had shielded my thoughts from his sight, but I had not, it appeared, blocked his castings out should he put enough force behind them; and this rang through my skull with the resonance of a bell. Valdor had clearly been spoken to as well, for he slowed into motionlessness for the first time since I had laid eyes upon him.

+This is hardly maintaining secrecy,+ Malcador continued, his mental voice just as dry and stem as his physical one. +Engaging in a spear fight on the roof of the Imperial Palace! +

'Captain-General Valdor is the one who drew attention to me,' I replied

aloud. I relaxed my guard stance, although I did not take my eyes off my opponent, even when I inclined my head in a small bow. 'Congratulations, and well met.'

Malcador didn't reply with words, but the impression of disgust from his mind was unmistakeable. I couldn't be certain whether he'd disapproved of what I'd done, the manner in which I'd done it, both, or something else entirely, but the Sigillite would have to live with my interpretation of his lessons. There was no corresponding sending from my father. I was certain He understood what I had been doing, and the intention behind it.

'Who are you?' Valdor said. He was not tense, as such, but he was still ready to flow into the attack at a moment's notice.

I gave him a half-smile. I am Alpharius.

The name meant nothing to him back then, but realisation seemed to dawn nonetheless, and he extinguished his blade's disruptor field. 'You are one of the Astartes' primogenitors. No other being of which I am aware could come close to matching me in combat. But they were all lost.'

Come close to. I filed that away for future reference. We had matched each other utterly, in the few seconds we had been engaged, and Valdor had been wearing powered armour that enhanced his movements and reflexes. Should I ever have a similar suit, I would be intrigued to try the captain-general once more.

'Not all were lost,' I told him. 'Not for as long as you have believed. And as I suspect you heard from Malcador, my existence was intended to remain secret. Even from you, it seems.'

That jibe got no response from him, for Valdor is my father's creature in a way few others are. If the Emperor had not seen fit to confide in him, that was the way it should be. However, although his helm had no expression that could darken, his voice did it for him when he pointed at the weapon I held. 'That is Garudo's spear. You killed him.'

'I did,' I acknowledged.

'He was loyal to the Emperor,' Valdor accused.

'I have heard rumours about events at Mount Ararat,' I countered, 'and seen precious few Thunder Warriors of late. How much value is placed on loyalty to the Emperor, when other purposes come to the fore?'

'Have you been speaking to High Lord Kandawire?' Valdor demanded, and there was a minute shift in his stance and readiness. He was preparing to

ignite the Apollonian Spear once more.

I shook my head. 'The Provost Marshal knows nothing of me, but you are correct that she suspects.'

'I know I am,' Valdor said.

'Her people are tracking your weapons shipments,' I told him.

'I know that too.'

Others have, at times, accused Constantin Valdor of arrogance.

I cannot say I believe he is truly capable of the emotion. But by all the stars, he can give the impression of it.

'I infiltrated the Palace inside one of those shipments,' I told him, and received the slightest of tilts of his head in response.

'Indeed. To what end?'

'I would have thought that was obvious,' I replied, slightly irritated. 'To get into a position where I could, at least in theory, threaten the life of the Emperor. To highlight the flaws in the Palace's security.' I smiled at him. 'I do not believe you are capable of treachery, captain-general. How good can you be, therefore, at predicting the actions of your enemies?'

'I recognised your actions underground were a diversion,' Valdor said. 'I surmised your purpose, and calculated the best spot from which to take a shot, as the Emperor's craft came in to land. You were not yet aiming when I attacked. The margin was slight, but it was sufficient. Your exercise failed, although that does not mean that lessons cannot be learned.'

I shook my head. 'Once again, you were looking in the wrong direction.'

I pulled from my pouch the device I had touched as the Emperor's shuttle had been landing, and threw it to him. Valdor caught it with a movement of his offhand, but nothing else shifted in his stance. Had it been a distraction, prior to me launching an attack, he would still have been ready.

'What is this?' he demanded.

'A command relay for the override devices I planted on the controls of a defence gun while I was pretending to perform an inspection,' I told him. 'It gives me control over barrel rotation, pitch and yaw, and firing. I could have blown the Emperor's shuttle out of the sky before it even landed, had I chosen to. You would not have been in time to prevent that.

Valdor's helm regarded me for several long, slow seconds. Then he tucked my command relay away, and held out his hand. 'Garudo's spear.'

I threw it to him, although in truth, I was mildly disappointed. I had no

illusions that I could have kept it without angering him, and that seemed unwise given we both ultimately had the same interests at heart, but the weapon had felt a good fit.

'Tomorrow, we will discuss the nature of the weaknesses you found and exploited,' Valdor said. 'In the meantime, I suggest you do not make a habit of killing the Emperor's Chosen.'

'I have no intention of doing so,' I assured him. My father had greeted my rediscovery with wonder; Malcador, with intrigue and some satisfaction. It appeared my first impression on Constantin Valdor had not been so positive.

No matter. I suspected I was not easily likeable, and this bothered me not at all. I had my purpose, and my duty. All else was secondary.

Valdor didn't take the hint immediately, of course. It took Amar Astarte's betrayal, and further prompting from Malcador, before he initiated the Blood Games. Everyone presumed it was his idea, and how could I argue? I was as yet unknown to the Imperium at large. I should be satisfied, I suppose, that my work was heeded and improvements were made, but I am not Valdor, to work without regard for whether anyone hears my name. Nor am I Fulgrim, mind you, or the Lion, both of whom yearn for recognition of their brilliance: and brilliant they are, indeed. I do not strive to be seen as the greatest, or even a first amongst equals.

But I am not immune to the lure of glory. I don't think any of my brothers are. Even Perturabo, who is perhaps the humblest of us all, is not without his vanity. I feel perhaps it weighs on me harder than my brothers, for I have done so much for the Imperium - or I believe I have - without anyone knowing of it. That is my own fault to an extent: I chose not to reveal myself when I could have done. I wished to see and assess all of my brothers before I showed myself, so I could truly be the secret sword if it was required.

Valdor handled High Lord Kandawire's attempted rebellion well, I must admit that. He barely needed any guidance fot the plan, although it was a simple one: lure in an overconfident, emotional enemy, and crush them when they are overextended. It is one I shall use again, should I have the

opportunity to.

While Valdor battled Primarch Ushotan, Apollonian Spear against plasma blade, I marched with the very first Space Marines, clad in the same basic armour plate that would become designated as Mark II, and wielding a boltgun. They were not truly my sons, but I felt a sense of pride as I fought alongside them and saw their fluid lethality utterly overwhelm the best of what Terra had left to offer in defiance. This was their first test, and they had passed it as competently as I had mine. I knew, then, that we were destined for greatness.

After the rebellion had been dismantled and Astarte's treachery laid bare, even after my father's shocking pronouncement that He thought I might not be the only one of my brothers still alive, I listened to the recordings High Lord Kandawire had made of her conversations with Valdor, when she fruitlessly attempted to get him to admit to executing the majority of the remaining Thunder Warriors at Mount Ararat. Something struck me about it, and I sought Valdor out.

'When you spoke with Kandawire, you never lied,' I said to him. 'Except on one detail.'

Valdor was attending to his armour. He did not cease his work when he replied.

'What was that?'

'You told her there were no new generals,' I said. 'But you were aware of me by the time these conversations took place.'

Valdor hesitated, as though considering his words, but still he did not pause in his task.

'I did not lie,' he said, after several long seconds. 'I do not know what you are. But you are not a general.'

I still think back to that conversation.

PART TWO

GHOST LEGION

IN THE SHADOWS

We pressed forwards, hugging walls and corners, trusting to the chameleonic plates of our armour to shield us from watchful eyes as the city burned around us. The armed forces of Trulla had a preference for high-powered energy weapons that were devastating when they hit, but also had a tendency to set fires when they missed. Several of my brothers - Ferrus, Mortarion, Perturabo, even Russ - would have taken the enemy's strength as a challenge, and met it head-on.

Several of my brothers are fools.

An enemy who does not shoot is no threat. An enemy who shoots blindly is as much a threat to their own side as they are to yours. An enemy whose shots can be guided is an asset. We had studied Trulla closely before engaging, before they had even heard of the Imperium, seeking to understand not just their strength of arms but also their culture. Such a process took time, of course, but that was why I had begun sending my human agents far and wide as soon as my father had launched the Great Crusade, seeding them into pre-compliance societies. He wanted to bring His golden light to humanity and see it flock to His banners; I was planning for the alternative.

He didn't know. He didn't need to know.

Many of my agents did not fulfil their original purpose, it's true.

Some died. Some had been sent to planets and systems that my Legion never went near, although even there, they still had a role to play. Who can say how many seemingly chance occurrences, how many enemy missteps, how many abrupt surrenders to my brothers were brought about by the actions of my network? And of course, once in place, my agents' usefulness was not expended. I could pull on strings in many places, should the need arise: some hypno-conditioned, some whose loyalty ran bone-deep, all assets that were useful and yet disposable.

However, my agents' greatest successes came where I was in the theatre of *war* myself, and could utilise their placement to the greatest effect. For example, having all your armed units continuously broadcast an ident code to identify and locate them to overall command is a wonderful idea in theory. In practice, an enemy might be able to break into and override that code in approximately half of your units, instead replacing it with the slogan of a vicious uprising that occurred some fifty years previously and nearly tore your society apart. That can lead to a lot of angry, trigger-happy people, especially when there have been a few notable sabotages of prominent cultural locations in recent weeks.

Suddenly the enemy has revealed themselves, and the enemy wears your face. A half-buried cultural memory rears up, and the state of heightened alert disintegrates into an abrupt and bloody civil war. Loyalists fire on those broadcasting subversive slogans. The supposed subversives, unable to shut off their equipment and, because of the recent tensions, given insufficient time to explain themselves, shoot back in the interests of self-preservation.

How could this be the work of an outsider? How would they know your history? Besides, they would have targeted military installations, ammunition dumps and communication relays, not memorials to fallen heroes, or the statues of the First Founders.

In reality, we did target all those locations. We simply didn't strike until the Trullans were already tearing themselves apart, and were so intent on purging their own that they weren't looking for anything else. When your enemy is apparently shouting to announce their presence, silence is seen as little threat, until it's too late.

The preparation had been taking place for years. Our covert hostile action had begun five Terran weeks ago. In terms of direct military action we had been in the field for a matter of hours, and the majority of the planet was already ours for the taking.

Now the capital was aflame, and thick smoke filled the air, along with the sizzling report of energy weapons, and explosions as fuel lines detonated, or another gunship or troop transport was shot out of the sky by one side or the other. The general populace was cowering in panic, the security forces were at war with themselves, and no one was paying much attention to the six figures in Mark IV plate advancing on a main-road intersection through the night's shadows. The local lumen-equivalents overhead had gone dark: one of my teams had detonated explosives in the local sub-relay seven minutes previously.

I had four Headhunters with me - Eitan, Derdus, Jha-Tena, and Hymor - and one member of the Librarius, Akil Gukul. I was playing the role of the Headhunter prime, and was clad as my companions were in cameleoline-imbued Legion plate. We were not here to bring word of the Imperium, for Trulla would be too proud to accept it. We were here to gut this society and leave it floundering, likely desperate for strong leadership and even if not, certainly too disorganised to put up more than a token resistance. The Imperial Fists would be here within six months, if my calculations were accurate regarding how long it would take their nearest expeditionary fleet to finish their current compliance campaign and then move on to this, the next logical system.

I wondered briefly if Rogal would suspect the hand of another I doubted it. My XX Legion were not yet known openly by their brothers- we had no recorded heraldry or colours, organisational charts or even name. So far as the vast majority knew - even those who had insight into the Astartes project - the XX Legion had not yet progressed to full uptake, let alone reached readiness to have a presence in the field.

We were a ghost Legion, the Emperor's secret sword. The Legiones Astartes were the Imperium's great champions, noble warriors who bestrode battlefields wielding mighty weapons, and brought worlds into compliance through force of arms and the shining beacon of the Imperial Truth: at least, if you listened to Guilliman, or Dorn, or Fulgrim. They had no place for assassins, for saboteurs, for tactics that assailed the enemy's psychology as

much as their physical presence. They knew one way of war, and they were very good at it, but their success had blinkered them.

'Target status?' I demanded.

'Approaching,' Gukul replied. He was not using an auspex, but I did not doubt him. Some other Legions might shun the use of psykana powers, but I saw no reason not to adopt them. Any tool is worth using, so long as the wielder maintains focus and control. Gukul was one of our best.

'Nature?' I asked.

'Three vehicles,' Gukul replied, his voice slightly strained from effort. Having seen him performing similar tasks bareheaded, I knew that beneath his helmet, his eyes would be moving visibly behind closed lids. 'Groundcars.'

'How can you tell they're groundcars?' Dercius asked.

Although I couldn't see Gukul's face, the slight inflection in his voice suggested to me that he was smiling beneath his helmet. 'One of the drivers is thinking about the suspension. The target is in the centre of the middle one.'

'Only three?' Jha-Tena asked. 'Lord, are we certain this is the high command?'

'We are,' I replied. Other primarchs might have bristled at being questioned by a line trooper. I did not. To be questioned, to examine your reasoning, and conclude that you were indeed correct is one thing. To object to questions on the basis of your own superiority is to reject the possibility that you can ever be wrong, and that is a dangerous pinnacle indeed to balance upon.

Similarly, questions should be encouraged. To do otherwise moulds a Legion into an inflexible, rote-learned, homogenous mass whose warriors look permanently to their superiors for inspiration. Such a force could be effectively decapitated by a surgical strike on its leadership.

Which was, coincidentally, exactly what we were about to perform.

I could hear the vehicles approaching now - how far the senses of power armour had come, since that first battle outside the Lion's Gate in the driving snow! - and I readied myself. I held a plasma pistol in one hand and a currently deactivated power spear in the other. The latter was not regularly issued to the Legions, but I'd taken a fancy to the weapon type ever since impersonating the Custodian Garudo on Terra, and had adapted the design

from the phoenix spears used by the Emperor's Children. Already, the other Legions were adopting their own preferred methods of warfare, and jealously guarding their tricks and devices. Little kings, setting up their own borders around their own little hills. What else could be expected, from brothers who had been rulers in their own right before my father found them?

Fulgrim didn't know we had his designs - I don't believe he even knew we existed, beyond the theoretical understanding that there was a XX Legion somewhere, presumably still in the bowels of the Imperial Palace - and what he didn't know wouldn't hurt him. It would, however, hurt the Grand Overlord currently being borne towards us, or more accurately towards his emergency bunker: a route that took him past where we now lurked, while above us the sky flared as his underlings shot each other down.

We waited as the sound of the vehicles drew closer, powerful engines being pushed to their limits. I gave no orders. Every warrior already knew their role.

One engine abruptly dropped in tone and output, followed immediately by another. The foremost vehicle continued at its maximum speed, and roared past us: sleek and dark, not overtly military in appearance, but clearly well armoured.

The second groundcar, in which the Grand Overlord rode, came into view a few moments later. Its pace was slowing now Gukul was influencing the driver, and the boltguns of my squad opened up to greet it. Their salvo ripped through the protective metal and tore holes in its flank, but their primary focus was the driver's compartment. The vehicle slewed as bolt-shells found him and pulped his body, and it drove headlong into the corner of a building on the other side of the intersection.

Gukul grunted, and dropped to one knee, just as the third vehicle - which had slowed to keep pace with the unexpected deceleration of the one preceding it - veered around the corner and came straight for us. A security detail, intending to sell their own lives to give the Grand Overlord time to get clear, if he still lived. It demonstrated admirable courage and training, and not even Astartes weaponry could vaporise a groundcar of that size and momentum sufficiently to prevent it from ramming us, in the brief time we had.

We dodged it, instead.

Eitan and Dercius went to our left and Hymor to our right, dragging the apparently stunned Gukul with him. Jha-Tena and I leaped straight upwards and over it. We hadn't planned for this, but my Legion held to the general principle that an enemy offence should be avoided, not weathered as a matter of pride.

I landed, and heard the screech of tyres behind me as the groundcar, realising it had missed us, attempted to kill its momentum. They'd signed their own death warrant: Eitan and Dercius would swarm the vehicle before it could move again, and would swiftly eliminate the occupants. Ahead of us, the first escort vehicle had realised what had transpired behind it, and had also slowed. Jha-Tena pulled two frag grenades from his belt, primed them, and threw them in one smooth motion. They arced through the air, flying farther and more accurately than any unaugmented human could have managed, and detonated beneath the groundcar's chassis with enough force to flip it over.

'Gukul?' I asked without turning, as I advanced on the target vehicle.

'Forgive me, lord,' Gukul replied, somewhat shakily. 'I've never before been holding the mind of another when they were killed. The experience was... unpleasant'

'We will note that for the future,' I said. I heard a window smash as Dercius punched his way into the third vehicle, then an explosion as a venom sphere went off inside. The spheres were new developments of our own, an improvement on the standard frag grenade, incorporating trace elements of a crystal that had proved highly toxic to most forms of life, which we'd discovered on a planet in the galactic north. One or two members of the Mechanicum assigned to us had been reluctant to incorporate them; they had suffered unfortunate and entirely plausible battlefield accidents, providing opportunities for advancement within our ranks for more open-minded individuals. The loss was a shame, but my Legion was still operating secretly, and we could not afford resentment risking that. The Mechanicum had to work for the advancement of the Imperium, after all.

Any tool is worth using, so long as the wielder maintains focus and control.

The rear doors of the stricken vehicle in front of me opened, and a bodyguard stumbled out on each side. They were elite soldiers, clad in the best body armour this society could produce and bearing its signature

energy weapons, but no mortal can go through the sort of crash they'd just experienced without consequences. I aimed and fired, disintegrating the head of one with a ravening bolt of plasma. The other managed to fire his weapon, but I was already rolling underneath the beam, and came up to my feet in front of him with a thrust of my power spear that split his armour as though it were nothing more than silk. He drooped on the blade and I hurled him to one side, then turned towards the vehicle.

A figure scrambled out on the other side, awkwardly stumbling over the headless bodyguard lying there. It was the Grand Over- lord. Picts of the man were common in this society, and we had researched our targets well: even the back of his head gave me his identity. I hefted the power spear and threw it like a javelin. It planted between his shoulder blades and drove right through his body. He staggered and fell, his body wracked with spasms of pain, then passed out from shock. He would not come around again.

'Status?' I demanded, as I walked around the groundcar to retrieve my spear. I raised my plasma pistol and fired it at the first car, still on its roof. The fuel tank caught, and the entire thing blew apart in a bright yellow flower of flame and debris. There would be no survivors. A couple of small pieces of metal pattered against my armour: I ignored them.

'No injuries, lord,' Dercius replied.

I checked my chronometer. We had fulfilled our role within the time parameters allotted by the greater plan. Our extraction would occur in ten minutes, half a kilometre to the south.

My helmet's pict-feed was being recorded onto a data-slug, and I now broadcast the image of the Grand Overload, face down on the road and very obviously dead, to one of my operatives on the other side of the city. We had just seized control of one of the main communication hubs. Until now, the citizenry at large would have had no idea what was going on, isolated as they were from the military channels. It was time for that to change.

Fear and incomprehension at this sudden conflict would have

risen, swiftly and sharply. Now they would get an answer, and it would not be one they liked.

The airwaves began transmitting the same slogan as that which we had inserted into the military channels. It would be screaming at the populace from every frequency, and with it would come the image of their leader,

murdered in the street. Not only would the reason for the apparent uprising become clear, but so too would exactly how successful it had been. There would be no reason for any of those who still harboured such beliefs to not reveal themselves, confident their cause was in the ascendancy. Even if there was no meaningful support for it within the populace, the citizens would turn on each other as virulently as their military had, convinced that those responsible for this atrocity lived amongst them.

Had this been my Legion's world to conquer we would have let the disruption rise further, then eliminated any remaining military threats with a lightning assault from multiple directions. However, this world would simply have to tear itself asunder for a while before the Imperial Fists arrived to bring it into the fold. I was sure that what he would find would reinforce Rogal's belief in the supremacy of the Imperium, and its ways. That should please him.

'Lord,' Eitan asked, as we moved at speed away from the scene of our ambush. 'Will we get our own conquests, in time?'

'Does it rankle,' I replied, 'to see your brothers from other Legions amassing victories, and being hailed as heroes?'

'It does, lord,' Eitan replied honestly. 'We have even taken on their colours, at times, rather than use our own.'

I could understand Eitan's hunger for recognition. He was an original member of the Legion, from one of the rare pans of Terra not already bled dry by the endless thirst of my brothers' armies, although I had vastly expanded both our sphere and nature of recruitment since those early days. I did not have the same understanding of gene-smithing as my father, but I was aware the gene-seed gifted to my Legion was remarkably stable, and so we had been able to recruit some candidates that other Legions might not have found suitable.

I smiled inside my helmet. 'Patience, my son. Content yourself with these thoughts. Firstly, some of their victories have been enabled by us, though they know it not. Secondly, while they will think the Twentieth to be lost and leaderless, you have in fact known your primarch since you first ascended to the ranks of the Astartes. And thirdly, when it is time to reveal ourselves to the galaxy at large, we will eclipse them all.'

That prospect both excited and alarmed me in equal measure. I had my own hunger for recognition, which I had been careful to keep subservient to

the needs of the Imperium, but to step out of the shadows after so long was not something I would do lightly.

'Lord?'

That voice did not belong to one of my companions. It came from the micro-bead in my ear, and I recognised it as belonging to Armillus Dynat. Dynat had proved himself to be one of my most capable commanders, and I had left him in overall control of this operation while I executed a front-line role, although in truth there should be very little to oversee given the self-contained natures of our activities. He would not be communicating with me from the *Alpha*, my battle-barge, which should have been concealing itself from enemy scanners behind the smaller of the planet's two moons, unless the matter was extremely urgent.

'Yes?' I replied. There was no need to reprimand Dynat for this breach of mission protocol. Either it would be appropriate, or it would not.

'We have just received a communication through the network. We may have found another brother.'

A thrill of excitement ran through me. The Emperor had found Horus, there was no argument there. However, my network had been instrumental in reporting back and guiding us towards some of my other brothers whom the Great Crusade had found. It had

been immediately obvious to those who had arrived at Macragge, Inwit and Chemos, for example, that their rulers must have been the creations of my father. So I - and, it must be said, Malcador - nudged the direction of events so my brothers would be discovered sooner, rather than later.

However, of all my brothers, there was one whom I hoped most desperately to meet. Although I had felt kinship of a sort when I had laid eyes on those found so far - all without their knowledge - I had not yet discovered the one whose soul I could feel was bonded to my own. It seemed a strange notion but I knew, with a certainty that outstripped virtually everything else, that somewhere in the galaxy there existed a brother with whom I could and would share everything.

'Acknowledged,' I replied. 'Disengage all operatives, and prepare for departure.'

I would not let this wait. The Imperial Fists could deal with this world in whatever manner they found it, and we had already prepared the way for them. Even as my Headhunters, Gukul and I reached the bridge outlined in

our mission parameters and we dropped over the edge onto the vehicle passing below, I tuned into the local broadcasts and heard the primitive, warlike chant that had apparently so damaged this society a generation ago.

'BLOOD AND SKULLS! BLOOD AND SKULLS!'

Dorn was welcome to this system. I had more important places to be.

Rogal Dorn doesn't like me.

In truth, I'm not overly fond of him, either. It's hard to like your brother when he's so pompous, yet considers himself a humble servant. His armour is made from the same substance as our father's, and he has been given command of the Imperial Palace's defences: no one likes a braggart, but when you go attired for war in a manner reminiscent of the Master of Mankind, it behoves one to acknowledge that. Aggressive humility in such circumstances seems almost its own form of arrogance.

Also, he never lies. I don't trust anyone who only speaks the truth.

We only openly worked together once: in the campaign against the World-Prince. After my Legion's intervention had rapidly speeded the world's capitulation into compliance by guiding the assassinations of almost all their ruling class in one night, Rogal berated me not only for helping him, but for doing so badly, in his view. He claimed my Legion's efforts had been effective, but not optimally so, by my own criteria. And in this he was both correct, and misled.

It was true that I could have ordered my forces differently. I could have waited until the situation became even less stable for the defenders, and I could have avoided the assassination of the ruling blood and allowed a less fractious eventual compliance. The fact that I did not, and that Rogal

recognised this, tells us something.

Firstly, it tells us Rogal believed my Legion should work as directed by the Imperial Fists, and that my methods should be subservient to his. For a Legion and a primarch so caught up in their devotion to the Emperor and the Imperium above all else, that is an interesting juxtaposition of supposed humility and unacknowledged arrogance. He and I are brothers, after all, and supposedly equals. I wonder if Rogal would have made the same demands had he been joined in the field by Horus? Or whether, since my Legion and I were perceived latecomers to the Great Crusade, he viewed that he had superiority by means of seniority?

Secondly, it tells us that Rogal was aware of the potential for forcing compliance by means of non-military intervention as well as his own successes in the field, but had made no efforts to bring this about himself. He always sees open combat as the only true method.

Thirdly, it tells us that if you wish to find out whether your brother knows how you think, you should give him the opportunity to criticise your conduct and see what aspects he focuses on. He might indeed identify true failings that should be corrected, but he will almost certainly highlight his own blind spots and weaknesses, as much through what he does not say as that which he does.

Why should I need to know this?

Rogal has made the Throneworld his, in a manner no other primarch has done. He has overseen its defences and tailored them to his own wishes. He is the Praetorian of Terra. Should my father fall for some reason, who else would the Imperium look to for leadership in the immediate aftermath of such a tragedy than the loyal, devoted son who stands in the Imperial Palace, behind the defences he has constructed, wearing armour that is, after all, so very reminiscent of our father's?

I do not trust Rogal Dorn.

And the legionnaires now in stasis-sleep beneath the Gobi tox-wastes are evidence that I have not been idle.

SECRETS WITHIN SECRETS

I sat in a council chamber on the *Alpha*. My battle-barge contained several such rooms, but none were particularly ostentatious. I had drilled into my Legion from the day it was formed that appearances were essentially meaningless: only actions and ability were important. Horus could have his magnificent strategium on the *Vengeful Spirit's* bridge; it would simply make him that much easier to find, should any foe board the vessel. I had already altered the *Alpha's* floor plan to confuse any enemy who thought they were familiar with the layout of a Gloriana-class vessel. I saw no reason to habitually hold briefings in the same location, either.

'So, Volda Beta,' I said, to the room at large. 'Tell me what we know.'

Ingrin Sevan stepped up. She was human, apparently unaugmented, but possessed of an exceptionally keen intellect and eye for detail. I'd recruited her approximately a decade before, from a world the Ultramarines had conquered. I think the lure of covert operations appealed to her sense of the dramatic, but that didn't colour her judgement.

Some other Legions dismiss humans as weak or inferior, and to a certain extent that is true. But we were not building a galaxy only for the strong, and if we did not listen to those over whom the Imperium would be ruling,

then what we were building would never endure. Dorn or Perturabo will tell you that a structure can only be as strong as the materials from which is it made, and yet no one seemed to apply the same logic to a society.

'Volda Beta was brought into compliance forty-seven sidereal years ago,' Sevan began. 'In general, it has been conducting itself as expected since. Production yields from its manufactoria are within appropriate quotas, and the regiments it has raised for the Imperial Army are performing acceptably in the engagements to which they have been assigned. On the surface, it's an unremarkable world of the burgeoning Imperium, with no particularly outstanding or deplorable features.'

'On the surface?' Armillus Dynat said.

Sevan smiled. 'Start to scratch away at the skin, and something else is revealed to those with the eyes to see it. Volda Beta has not completely accepted the rule of the Emperor, and pockets of resentment and resistance remain, even now.'

In another Legion's council, this might have been cause for outrage. In mine, it was merely accepted with a nodding of heads. My brothers all face outwards, seeking to expand our horizons, and too few of them pay much attention to that which has been left behind. Guilliman does, I will not dispute that, for he has the soul of a bureaucrat - and that is not so demeaning a description as it may sound, since I greatly admire Malcador, and there is no greater bureaucrat than he. However, Fulgrim, the Lion, even Horus; they conquer, then look to the figurative horizon once more, leaving the rest of the work in the hands of lesser men and women.

A world that offered itself joyously to Horus Lupercal, or wept at the beauty of the Angel, might well start to reconsider once those glowing figures were replaced with governors who were no more radiant than whatever hierarchy had existed previously. Someone had to keep things tidy after my brothers had gone on their way, taking their glory and naturally awe-inspiring natures with them, and leaving behind the dull drudgery of numbers and statistics. That someone was often the XX Legion. Assassins, snipers, spies and saboteurs - all the things the other Legions detested or dismissed, we wholeheartedly embraced, not just to claim worlds but to keep them.

Denouncing a revolutionary firebrand is one thing, but nothing gets the message across quite so eloquently as an anonymous headshot delivered

from two kilometres away.

'Does it require a harrowing?' Dynat asked. He asked the question of the chamber in general, not just of me. I was the ultimate authority in the Legion, but that did not mean I took decisions arbitrarily. I was surrounded by brilliant minds, both human and Astartes. It would have been foolish of me not to determine their opinions first.

'Not by my judgement,' Sevan replied. 'It certainly does not require the official redeployment of Imperial forces to deal with it. The local proctors are largely able to contain matters. We have, however, stoked some of these seditious elements, which has encouraged the main movers to reveal themselves. As a result, a single Headhunter team should be able to eliminate all identified priority targets within a short window, thereby removing the threat of rebellion.'

'Are we certain the time frame is right?' Ingo Pech asked. I had my eye on Pech: he had already risen within our ranks, and I felt he had the potential to be something special. It was he and Thias Herzog who had first suggested cosmetically altering their appearances to mimic my own, thereby allowing me to move more freely within our Legion even if my identity was discovered. I debated that proposal for a long time. I'd always been troubled by the tendency of the Luna Wolves to resemble Horus as they matured, since surely seeing yourself reflected back at you was no great encouragement of humility. I'd settled on a compromise, which was to ensure that the decisions within my Legion were taken openly so that even I was not shielded from challenge or question. Only time would tell whether Horus would have his own methods for dealing with this problem.

'What do you mean by that?' Dynat asked Pech.

'Rebellions are problematic beasts,' Pech replied. They're unpredictable. Provoking revolutionary elements to the point where the ringleaders are identifiable, but not to the point where the movement has taken on a life of its own and the ringleaders are no longer needed, is a delicate balance, and not an exact science'

'Our agents are deeply embedded,' Sevan assured him. 'Even the planet's own authorities are not party to what we know. We wouldn't have pushed unless we knew we could deploy appropriate countermeasures, and I'm confident an action at this point will drastically reduce any confidence in a rebellion's feasibility.'

I nodded. 'We will send a team. I recommend the one I commanded on Trulla, with their prime reinstated.'

Heads nodded, including Dynat's. It was his approval I was most interested in, since he'd been in overall command. Clearly he had not seen anything suggesting my recommendation was unwarranted.

'The team will be provided with the details of their targets,' Sevan assured us. 'Now for the primary objective. Lord Dynat?'

Armillus Dynat stood. He had never undergone cosmetic surgery, and in fact was rather more visually striking than many in the Legion due to the three-headed hydra tattoo that took up most of the right side of his face.

'This objective on Volda Beta is in itself a smokescreen,' he began, 'and would have been so no matter the level of force brought to bear on it. The true objective is the extraction of information pertaining to the possible whereabouts of another of our lord's brothers.

Some of those in the chamber already knew this, and some did not There were a few intakes of breath, some sober nods, and one or two excited glances. I was not immune to the excitement myself, even though I already knew what was being discussed. The closer we got to action, the more tangible the possibility became.

'Our network has received rumours of a being sighted some way from here, in the galactic north-east - a being which appears to bear the characteristics of a primarch,' Dynat informed us all. 'These rumours have come from refugees of the renewed rang- dan offensive.'

A mutter ran around the chamber. The diabolical rangdan had already bled the Imperium twice: news that this vicious xenos species had returned to plague us again was dire indeed.

'Lord Alpharius will transport to the surface, along with Gukul of the Librarius, using the Headhunters' mission as a cover,' Dynat continued. They will make contact with our operatives on Volda Beta to find eyewitnesses and verify the truth of these claims, as well as getting an exact location of the sightings'

'Interrogative.'

That was Magos Kunitax of the Mechanicum, one of the Legion's primary allies amongst the Martian priesthood. His larynx had been replaced by a synthesiser decades before, and his utterances were grating and mechanical. His ascendancy with us had been guaranteed by the death of his rather more

reactionary predecessor, and I viewed him to be nearly as much of the Legion as one of our own warriors. Besides which, he was easily capable of calculating what his fate would be if he betrayed us.

'Proceed, magos,' Dynat acknowledged him.

If the Headhunters' objective is already being performed secretively, Kunitax buzzed, 'in what manner is Lord Alpharius' objective using it as a cover?'

'Secrets within secrets, magos,' Dynat smiled at him. 'Our operation on Volda Beta will not be recorded in the annals of the Imperium, but the fact we have dispatched legionnaires to the surface will be no secret within our ranks. The primary objective however, will be known only to those assembled here. Anyone seeking to pass information beyond our own borders will think they know the truth, but they will only know the lesser truth.'

'And if the greater truth does somehow make its way out into the galaxy,' I added, looking around at those gathered, 'the list of possible culprits is distinctly shorter.'

Magos Kunitax dipped his hood in acknowledgement. 'Your logic is sound.'

I smiled. 'Then let us prepare ourselves. If this is another of my brothers, and he was witnessed by refugees from the rangdan's attacks, he may even now be fighting them. We know they are a terrible foe, and early reports indicate they have already inflicted heavy losses on the Dark Angels. I would not have a brother fall in battle before he has even been reunited with my father.'

My words were good, and even truthful, but they were not wholly honest. Something was already telling me that these rumours were genuine, and that this was indeed a brother of mine, but also that it was the brother I most yearned to meet. I did not just want my father to meet this new brother.

I wanted to meet him myself.

I sometimes wonder which of my brothers would have done best had the Emperor's influence not come into their lives.

Lorgar would have been lost, I think: I get the impression he knew a greater destiny awaited him, and he would never have been satisfied had it not found him. Of all of us, in fact, I think Lorgar would have benefited most from being the one to land on Terra. We have never been close, but I feel there is a yearning in his soul that could have been filled at a much younger age, had he been in my place.

Magnus found someone with whom he could speak about the great powers he's capable of wielding, and I don't think he would have been fulfilled in the same way without my father's guidance. In the same vein, Fulgrim might only seem to wish adulation from anyone around him, but I honestly believe it did him good to find a being in the galaxy greater than him. It gave him something to emulate and aspire to, when he'd so easily surpassed everyone who'd surrounded him until that point. And of course, without meeting our father he would never have been able to forge his confusing, yet obviously genuine friendship with Ferrus.

Guilliman and Dorn, by contrast, were masters of their own realms.

Had the Emperor not found them, I'm certain they ivould have continued ruling their populations efficiently and, insofar as can be judged, justly. In

time, either or both of them might well have ventured further than they already had, perhaps creating little Imperiums of their own.

Angron and Curze? I'm not certain their lives were greatly improved by my father's arrival, in all honesty. The population of Nostramo have certainly not done well out of it.

As for the others, it's hard to look at, say, the Khan, or Russ, and think they needed the Emperor in their lives. They are freer spirits, it might be said, but this does not mean they are fools. Sometimes I wonder if Jaghatai views the Imperium more as a means to get him to the stars than anything else, but that is of little concern. After all, any tool is worth using, so long as the wielder maintains control and focus.

And we are tools, of that I have no doubt. I do not think many of my brothers realise this fact, but Russ is one who does. He does not like me any more than Rogal does - in fact, I would say considerably less - but I found him next to me at a victory feast once, and we exchanged words. He was drunk, or seemed so: I suspect this was a low ruse on his part, for our very natures allow us to metabolise all but the most potent toxins without harm. However, drunkenness seems more suited to the roaring, fur-clad giant that is Russ than it does the patrician nobility of Guilliman, or the dourness of Perturabo, and so some might underestimate him.

'What are you supposed to be, then?' he demanded of me. I had not long revealed myself to my brothers, and this was the first time we had spoken.

I smiled at him. 'I am Alpharius.'

Russ grunted in response. 'I asked 'what', not 'who'.'

'I'm not sure I follow,' I replied.

'I doubt that.' He took a gigantic swig from what was effectively a small barrel in his hand, which reeked of the chemical swill Fenrisians call mjod. 'But if you insist - we are all an aspect of the Allfather, or have a manner in which we serve. He has His castellan, His herald, His siege-master, His governor, His...' Here Russ paused and cast a glance over his shoulder at where Magnus stood, some distance away. 'Sorcerer,' the Wolf King finished, in tones of distinct displeasure.

I said nothing. Russ had not listed himself in his speech. There was little doubt what his role was, at least to anyone who had seen the Wolves fight. Russ has a fury in battle that is a near match for Angron's, but he possesses a tighter focus. The Wolf King is our father's executioner. I suspect at least

one of my departed brothers could have attested to that fact, although I have absolutely no evidence to suggest that is the case. Call it a feeling, if you will.

'So I'll ask you one more time,' Russ said, fixing me with a stare that would have reduced a mortal to a quivering wreck. 'What are you supposed to be?'

I smiled at him again. 'I'm the one that keeps secrets.'

For a moment, I was not sure how he was going to react. Then his face split into a wide smile that showed his long canines - the only genuine smile I believe I have ever been the cause of, for Leman Russ - and he barked a laugh.

'Hah! Well, in that case, I'm surprised there's only one of you.'

TERRA'S GLORY

It would, naturally, have been very difficult to move any sizeable elements of the XX Legion's fleet into the Volda System without being detected. That is not to say that it would have been impossible - one of the advantages of having tech-priests like Magos Kunitax around was that they knew the Imperium-standard sensor tech that Volda had been issued with following compliance, and therefore the best ways around it - but there was no need. We were not intending to launch a large-scale operation.

We used a single Vagabond-class trader, the *Argolisa,* and drifted quietly into the system along with the regular shipping traffic. Had we been boarded by the local officials then they would have received something of a shock, for as well as the usual complement of a captain, a handful of officers and mates, and a crew of indentured voidborn and mind-wiped servitors, the *Argolisa* also boasted six legionnaires, a magos of Mars, and a primarch who was as yet unknown to the Imperium at large. Luckily for everyone concerned - mainly the locals - no such boarding action took place, and our ident codes were sufficient to see us take up a berth at one of the orbital platforms. We did not have long to wait before we were hailed.

'Vagabond Argolisa, *this is Captain Lanesra of* Terra's Glory,' the vox

crackled. *'Permission requested to dock with you for transference of cargo.'*

'Terra's Glory, this is the *Argolisa,'* Captain Johara replied crisply. As captain of a support vessel she was not privy to my true identity, but she was well aware that a lord of the XX Legion stood at her shoulder, and I had no doubt she wanted to impress. 'What word do you have for us?'

'Argolisa, *the word is 'adelphos'.'*

Johara nodded. 'Confirmed, *Terra's Glory,* you have permission to dock.' She snapped the vox off and snorted. ' *'Terra's Glory',* indeed. A fancy name for something that could be swatted out of the sky by a rogue avian.'

I glanced at the scope. The *Terra's Glory* was indeed a small cargo lighter, suitable for little more than shuttle runs from orbit to surface. More importantly, the captain was an operative with local knowledge upon which we could draw. 'It will serve.'

'I wonder how many ships called *Terra's Glory* there are in the galaxy?' mused Autilon Skorr. He was the usual prime of the Headhunter team I'd commanded on Trulla, but competent and indeed brutally efficient though he was in this role, I had an idea his talents might be better employed elsewhere. Skorr was not well suited to subduing his own strong personality in the interests of subtlety or subterfuge, so I was minded to exploit those traits, and let him be his own person. The day would come, before too long, when the XX Legion would need to finally announce itself to the galaxy at large, even if I did not yet reveal myself. Skorr, like Dynat, could be one of our faces to our brother Legions; an easily recognisable, forcible soul, and a handy counterpoint to any accusations of deliberate evasiveness in terms of our personnel or appearance.

'Perhaps we should adopt the name for all our craft,' Dercius joked. 'Can you imagine the confusion in an enemy fleet if every vessel they faced appeared to have the same designation?'

The *Terra's Glory* was coming alongside, and it adjusted its position with delicate thruster jets before extending its docking corridor. A faint thump indicated that the magnetic seals had affixed, and a green light flashed to show our sensors had detected a fully pressurised, breathable atmosphere on the other side. Not that it would have mattered to us, since our armour was fully capable of sustaining us in hard vacuum or toxic atmosphere for hours, but it was an indication that the captain of the *Terra's Glory* had not been overcome by foolhardy dreams of piracy.

We moved to the docking bay at speed, but without undue haste. A lighter taking on cargo from a trader vessel would expect to be in place for some time, as items were moved and checked, bills of lading verified, appropriate payments cleared, and so forth. Should anyone have been watching us, a particularly brief docking would be notable, and might lead to further attention. Secrecy was not paramount here, but it was desirable. Besides, methods and personnel should not ideally be stress-tested for the first time under critical conditions.

Captain Lanesra of the *Terra's Glory* was tall and wiry, of a build common to the humans native to the Volda System, and clad in flowing robes of dark purple in which glinted threads of vermillion. I knew these were a local custom by which an individual's heritage and rank was denoted, and that judging by the pattern and frequency of the threads, the person I was facing would have traditionally been near the bottom of the class system.

From such humble origins do the XX Legion find many of our operatives. Rank and connections have their uses, there is no doubt about that, but all too often rank and connections come with pre-existing hubris. Offer a member of the elite an opportunity to serve and they will weigh it minutely to see in what manner it will benefit them, and may well decide at a critical point that actually, they're happy with their life as it is. Offer an opportunity to serve to someone at the bottom of the social pile, give them a cause to believe in and the chance to be part of something greater than their own miserable circumstances, and they will seize it eagerly - particularly if by so doing they can gain things they otherwise would have lacked.

Humans like to feel special. If society does not view them as special then giving them an important secret of which they feel a part will fulfil that need, and so long as it makes them feel special, they will keep that secret. A rogue trader might look down their nose at the lighter captain, but if the lighter captain knows they are secretly serving the Legiones Astartes and the rogue trader is not, they will view themselves as the rogue trader's equal.

Lanesra's eyes widened as the hatch opened and they came face to face with seven legionnaires. The Headhunters wore darkened stealth armour, and it was not immediately obvious to which Legion they belonged, but Akil Gukul and I were unarmoured. Nonetheless, despite the fact I was

using my gift to conceal the full nature of my identity, given our size and companions, our nature could not be in doubt.

'Greetings,' Autilon Skorr said through his helm. 'I am Alpharius.'

'Lords,' Lanesra said, with a bow. 'I am honoured to serve.' They stepped back, and we entered the lighter.

It was indeed small, although perfectly capable of transporting the seven of us with room to spare. The rest of the space was filled by standard-issue transport crates containing low-grade foodstuffs, borne over from the *Argolisa* by servitors - after all, the *Terra's Glory* needed something to show for its jaunt into orbit. When the last crate had been placed and the last servitor had departed, Lanesra sealed the hatchway behind us with a grinding of machinery, and bowed again. 'Your orders, Lord Alpharius?'

'To the surface,' Skorr instructed them, his voice distorted by his helmet's speakers. 'A landing area within Prime City, but without extensive security.'

Lanesra nodded with a satisfied smile. 'I know just the place, lords. You can't run a vessel like this without knowing your way around the tariff-hounds.' They turned and headed for the cockpit without any further words, and a few moments later I felt the slight shift of the deck beneath us as the docking clamps released and we began to drift. Lanesra nudged us clear of the great, dark flank of the *Argolisa* with the thrusters - it was a small vessel by the standards of the Imperium, but still a leviathan when compared to the lighter - and then engaged the main drive to take us down towards the blue-grey orb of Volda Beta below.

The ship and shuttle traffic coming and going from a world like Volda Beta, a thriving production hub for the Imperium, can seem almost impenetrably dense when viewed from a cogitator relay. The sheer volume of craft is far greater than a human mind can parse and comprehend all at once, leading to the necessity' for it to be broken down by systems and practices, allowing every thing to be dealt with and processed individually, at the correct time.

When attempting to penetrate such a system, the perspective is very different. Then, no matter the size of the vessel in which you are travelling, it never feels like there is enough cover around you in the form of other craft. The nagging voice in the back of your head persists, insisting your chosen vessel is too big and therefore too noticeable, or too small and so obviously suspicious. Broadcast an ident, and you surrender yourself to the

system. Fly dark, and your deception is obvious to any that see you.

When I was penetrating the Imperial Palace's security, I was relying only on myself. Now I relied on others: those I'd trusted and trained, or those they had in turn trusted and trained, and so on. At what point in that tenuous web would errors occur?

Where did someone miss something? I would never know until it went wrong. Intelligent and perceptive though I am, and rational enough not to jump at shadows, I am familiar enough with human and even transhuman nature to know that no one is infallible. The greater the complexity and subtlety with which we operated, the greater margin for error there was; although that in turn meant that every success spoke most highly of my Legion.

Nonetheless, whenever I embarked on such clandestine operations it was not without a moments longing for the simplicity of direct combat. Although I took great satisfaction in many threads coming together to make a whole - especially when some or all of those threads had not directly been instigated by me, thereby vindicating my decisions with regard to my appointments - there was a thrill in matching yourself against another that cannot be found any other way: the knowledge that everything in this moment is dependent on you. I am a skilled fighter, and even Valdor did not outmatch me, although that contest was so brief that no particularly telling conclusions can be drawn from it. I could have engaged in a more direct manner of war, and taken the fight directly to whatever enemy my Legion and I faced. We would have excelled; it was what we were created for, after all. We might well have even enjoyed it.

However, the Imperium had enough Legions who fought in that manner. My XX would only engage when we could do most damage, and when the enemy was at their most vulnerable. A coward's approach, it might be thought, but efficiency is all too often seen as cowardice by those who lack its virtue.

I here would be no such combat on this mission, and so we trusted ourselves to subterfuge. The Headhunters would execute their targets in a night of finely focused but bloody retribution against those who dared question the Emperors glory, and Gukul and I would seek out these rumours regarding the being who might be my brother. We would come and go as spirits, leaving few the wiser as to our presence, and none with any

knowledge of our true nature or purpose.

I am rarely wrong.

When I am, it is memorable.

Other Legions, I believe, view it as offensive that my Legion take on not just my appearance when dealing with outsiders, but also my name. They think my warriors are claiming an identity above themselves; that they are not just being secretive, but in taking the name of their primarch are in some way seeking an authority which they do not deserve.

This could not be further from the truth.

My name is not special. It is not some unique, valuable commodity, to be hoarded: we are not the Luna Wolves, where Horus Aximand must be known as 'Little Horus' to ensure that his position below Horus Lupercal is known to all. My name can be used by any of my Legion. An Alpha Legionnaire calling themselves 'Alpharius' means one thing, and one thing only:

'My identity is unimportant. Only my function matters.'

THE FAMILIAR FACE

We touched down in Volda Beta's Prime City without any interference from the local authorities, and immediately exited the *Terra's Glory.* We left Captain Lanesra with instructions to proceed as usual with their cargo, but to be ready to return us to the *Argolisa* as required. Skorr's Headhunters melted into the darkness, already intent on their targets, while Gukul and I headed in a different direction.

We wore hooded cloaks, more to occlude our bulk than hide our faces, and I used my gift to diminish myself in the eyes of any observers, while Gukul deployed a low-level psychic shroud. Volda Beta's population were not too far below Astartes height on average, and some of the taller natives could have nearly looked Gukul in the eyes, so we were far from being giants in comparison, but Gukul would have weighed two or three times as much as a normal Voldan. Still, the nature of the population, and the traffic of the Imperium bringing a wide variety of people to these shores, meant we were not exceedingly remarkable.

We passed through a crowded market district, still bustling despite the fact Volda Beta was into its eighteen-hour night cycle, and the gentle drizzle. I steered us towards a small stall selling fresh vegetables: long, pale

tuberoots; fat squamish; and purple, bulbous darishes. I hadn't been looking for this stall as such, but the sign above it contained symbols common to those who worked with my Legion: stylised alpha symbols from the Helac script of ancient Terra, and the unbroken chain. They were not concealed in the design, but were seamlessly integrated in an aesthetically pleasing manner. I have always emphasised the benefits of hiding in plain sight where possible.

The proprietor was another Voldan, and the threads on her robes indicated a social status no higher than that of Captain Lanesra. She glanced up at us curiously as we edged our way to the front of her stall, but with no immediate recognition in her eyes.

'Greetings,' Gukul said, in Low Gothic. 'We're looking for a storyteller.'

The stallholder eyed us. 'I sell food, not stories, but mayhap I can help. Was there a word or a name about which you wanted a tale?' 'Hades,' Gukul replied. One of the scraps of myth remaining from ancient Terra, a brother who drew a lot that saw him consigned to the underworld of death. The word had not been chosen by me.

The stallholder nodded. 'The refugees have all sorts of tales to tell. Might be you II find what you're looking for in their lodgings. Now, are you buying?'

I selected a darish, and paid for it using an Imperial Throne. The stallholder gave me my change, and we moved away without looking back. I placed the change into the money pouch on my belt and rubbed my thumb over a coin that felt a little different to the rest. A series of raised bumps greeted my inspection: a language of touch I had developed and disseminated out into my network, winch could be used for leaving and passing information when speech or writing would be too risky.

'Four, and twenty-seven,' I reported.

'Hall Four, Room Twenty-Seven,' Gukul surmised. The refugee quarter was ahead of us: a mass of hastily requisitioned public buildings turned over to accommodating those who had fled the predations of the vicious rangdan. Reports from Volda Beta suggested there had been some tension between the locals and the new arrivals, based on the perceived capacities of infrastructure to cope with them. It was a foolish concern - the Imperial Administration was well aware of the situation, and would be moving quickly to bolster resources in all such affected areas - but the base

reactions of humanity can be neither predicted nor controlled by means of logic and reason. Seeing a potential pressure on their way of life, even in the short term, the people of Volda Beta sought someone to blame. Some - the ringleaders of whom Skorr and his team would be removing even now - had aimed their ire at the Imperium itself, but others had focused on those least able to fight back against such hostility.

As we approached the refugee quarter, the make-up of the crowd around us changed. No longer were we surrounded almost exclusively by locals; now there was a much greater variety of clothing styles, heights and builds, and even dialects. Gothic was the language of the Imperium, of course, but there were innumerable tongues individual to systems, planets or particular ethnic groups.

I could see a difference in how people held themselves, as well. The locals walked tall and proud, whereas those I suspected to be refugees moved more cautiously, hunched up against not only the rain but also, I believed, the memory of trauma. They didn't feel safe or secure here, and as much as that was the result of the welcome they'd received, I suspected it was also that apparent safety and security had already been ripped from them. The Imperium had failed to protect these people, and my father's utopian vision had been exposed as the unreachable ideal it was.

Striving for perfection is not foolish, but assuming you have achieved it most certainly is.

I resolved, then and there, that no matter the outcome of this mission, I would commit my Legion to the rangdan campaign. The Dark Angels were, by all accounts, being over-stretched and badly mauled. The Lord of the First would not give ground, for his pride would not allow him to, but only his tactical brilliance was preventing them from being completely overwhelmed. He would not call for aid; and besides, the other Legions were occupied in their own warzones. The XX Legion had operated in the shadows for long enough. My own pride, and the pleasure I took in such subterfuge, was not sufficient reason to let the galactic north collapse and untold suffering continue when I had the resources to assist. I need not reveal myself openly, but my warriors would finally walk the stars under their own banners.

'Do you see the locals, lord?' Gukul murmured to me as we passed through the crowd.

'I do,' I replied. Knots of Voldans were clustered together here and there, and the glances they cast at the refugees were not friendly ones. The refugees, heads down and together, talking amongst themselves, were presenting a closed-off face to their new neighbours. A natural response, to seek comfort in the familiar and the known after their ordeals, but the locals were clearly not seeing it that way. To them, I could tell, the refugees looked untrustworthy, potentially hostile. They seemed not to realise that they were behaving in exactly the same manner, and with far less reason.

These tensions had the potential to boil over. Perhaps the planetary governor required some guidance. I would have to give some thought as to how that would best occur, but in the meantime we were approaching the building that had been designated 'Hall Four'.

I had until recently been a scholam according to the plaque Situated by the main entrance, but now it was given over to housing those who had fled the rangdan offensive. We walked up the steps and through the main entrance, into an ostentatious atrium around which humanity was now scattered. Every corner was filled with people sitting huddled together with what little they might have managed to take with them as they fled. The air was filled with the babble of voices, but this was not idle chatter. There was urgency, and despair, and misery.

A woman wearing the uniform of the Imperial Administratum saw us enter, and hurried over. I do not know exactly what she saw, but whatever it was, it was not anything that intimidated her.

'We're full,' she said briskly, sweeping an arm around to indicate the people already waiting at the edges. 'No more rooms available, at least until the governor finalises the requisition of-'

'We do not seek a room of our own in which to stay, mamzel,' I interrupted her gently. She was obviously busy, and I had no wish to take up more of her time - or feature more prominently in her memory - than necessary. 'We're simply looking for the people in Room Twenty-Seven of this hall.'

She glanced at me once, but her eyes were incurious. 'That way,' she said, pointing at a flight of stairs. 'Up one floor, first corridor on the left. The rooms are numbered.'

'Our thanks,' I replied, and we walked away.

'Judging by the amount of people in this atrium, things are already overcrowded,' Gukul said to me quietly as we climbed the stairs. 'A

building like this is likely to have large classrooms and lecture theatres. I wonder if we will need more precise identifiers than simply a room number. There could be a dozen families to choose from.'

I nodded. 'Perhaps everyone in the same room has come from the same place. Perhaps they all saw him. A larger sample will make it easier to judge the truth of their accounts, in any case.'

'Perhaps not, lord,' Gukul replied. 'I can probe their memories to check the veracity of their statements, but human minds are malleable. If many people saw something remarkable, and they have discussed this amongst themselves, it is entirely possible that they have influenced each others' recollections.'

I tutted. 'No matter. Two people can recall something different even if they watched the same events from the same viewpoint. I suspect that if they saw one of my brothers, it will have been a distinct enough experience that minor variations of memory would not matter.'

'As you say, lord,' Gukul agreed. 'Laying eyes on you for the first time was an experience I doubt I will ever forget, though most other memories from my time before ascending to the Legion's ranks have been lost.'

That statement troubled me, but I had no more time to reflect upon it, for we had reached our destination: a dark door with local numerals scrawled on it in white paint. I knocked on it with a knuckle, then paused.

'There is no one inside,' I reported. I could hear no breath, no heartbeat.

'No one?' Gukul asked. 'Or no one living?'

It was a fair point. We did not know what wounds or illnesses the refugees might have suffered before arriving here, and it was already obvious that, at this stage at least, the infrastructure of Volda Beta was not capable of meeting their needs. I opened the door, which was not locked.

'Terra,' Gukul growled, as the room beyond was revealed. 'I'd not place an initiate in there.'

It had been a store cupboard. There were small holes in the walls on either side where shelves had been removed, which gave just enough space for the three empty bedrolls - two larger and one smaller - that were laid out, overlapping, on the floor. There was no window. I could not have laid out in it, full-length. Nor could Gukul. I doubted many of the locals could have.

'This is what we are reduced to,' I muttered. The Imperium, glorious beacon of humanity, leaving its subjects to huddle in lightless holes.'

'What do we do now, lord?' Gukul asked.

I closed the door again. 'We wait for the occupiers to return.'

It took several hours, during which time Gukul and I remained outside the store cupboard's door, since it was so cramped that waiting inside would have been ridiculous. We garnered cautious glances as the scholam's new inhabitants passed us in the narrow corridor, but no one challenged us. I doubted this was simply because, even with our true appearances being somewhat concealed, we were still obviously large and potentially intimidating. I suspected it was more that this place was not yet a community, if indeed it would ever become one. No one knew who should be here and who should not, nor had any interest in putting themselves out to find out, when we weren't outside their own rooms.

Finally, I heard three new sets of weary feet climbing the stairs, and two adults and a child shuffled into view. They froze as soon as they saw us, still twenty metres away.

'We mean no harm,' Gukul said, and I could feel the slight thrum as he wove the gentlest of psychic suggestions into his voice to convince them of his truthfulness. It was, after all, no lie. 'We merely wish to speak with you.'

They moved closer, still cautious, but a little more trusting now. I could see their eyes darting between us, trying to work out who we were. I wondered exactly what they saw. Was it a clear picture of something inaccurate? Was it a perception that seemed solid and real in this moment, but which would turn to haze and uncertainty as soon as we were out of their sight?

They certainly weren't Voldans. One of the adults was dressed in a heavy-duty grey bodysuit, such as might be worn by someone who worked with or around machinery, and who spent much of her time kneeling, crawling, or surrounded by oils and other contaminants. I imagined the tough material looked much as it had when she'd abandoned her workstation and fled for evacuation. Her partner, by contrast, wore a dress that had once clearly been a beautiful, multicoloured affair, but which was now stained and tom. Hand in hand between them was a young girl, dressed in the sort of rugged clothes in which children might be attired to minimise the impact of dirt. Her face was sleepy, but young though she was, I could tell from the set of her eyes, the shape of her nose and mouth, and even the tilt of her ears, that

she shared physical characteristics with both the adults. Either she was with her mother and, perhaps, the sister of her father, or this girl was the product of biological engineering that had combined both adults' DNA.

I felt a sudden kinship with her. This was not so very different in concept - although drastically so in scale - to what my father had done with my brothers and I. Faced with biological limitations, humanity had found a way to surpass them in order to achieve the results we desired.

Of course, this girl was human in a way I would never be.

'This is Akil,' I said. 'And I am Alpharius.'

My name meant nothing back then. There was no reason not to give it.

'Ani Nezra,' the one in the overalls replied hesitantly. 'This is Sev, my wife. And our daughter, Seddy.'

A polite introduction, an exchange of names. The grease by which human society works. Some of my brothers are capable of handling such interactions in a manner that maximises the efficiency of such conversations. Others of them, brilliant though they are in their own ways, have no insight into such things.

'We have been told you might have seen something remarkable, before you were evacuated,' I said softly. Gentle though my voice was, both adults' eyes widened, and I sensed their pulse rates increasing. Even the mention of their previous experiences was enough to raise their anxiety levels.

'We saw a lot of things,' the one in the dress replied, hesitantly. 'Not sure I'd use the word 'remarkable' for them.'

I opened my mouth to speak again, then closed it as a new group of refugees crested the stairs and began to file past us. This was not the place to engage in such a delicate conversation. I looked over my shoulder towards the far end of the corridor, where a window looked out over Prime City. It was not far from the doors of two other rooms - larger ones, undoubtedly with more people in - but at least no one would have good reason to approach us. Gukul could have shielded our conversation, of course, but given he was already working to conceal his own appearance, and would need to probe Ani and Sev's minds for truthfulness, a third simultaneous task might tax him to the point that the performance of one or more suffered as a result.

'Come,' I said. 'Let us talk down there.'

Ani looked down at her daughter. Seddy's legs were clearly no longer

really supporting her. 'She needs to sleep.'

'Put her in her bed,' I told her, 'and then come with us. Do not fear for her. We can see the door, and so long as we can see the door, she will be in no danger.'

I had no psychic ability to engender trust, but something about my voice must have communicated itself to them, despite my true nature being hidden. Ani nodded and opened the door of their cupboard to wrap Seddy in her bedroll, then quietly shut the door again. With that done, she and Sev followed Gukul and me to the far end of the corridor. I took a moment to look out of the window, at Prime City glistening under the night-time rain. Somewhere out there, my Headhunters were culling the Imperium's enemies; in fact, they had likely already completed their mission, and were simply awaiting our communication.

'What is this about?' Sev asked, from behind me.

'A warrior,' I said, turning back to face her. 'A singular warrior. I have heard rumours of such a being, fighting against the xenos filth that attacked your world. I believe you might have seen them.'

'Not I,' Sev replied, shaking her head. She looked at her wife.

'I did,' Ani said quietly. 'I'll never forget it.'

I nodded. In fact it was likely that she would, since Gukul might need to alter her memories to prevent the information from falling into the wrong hands, and indeed shelter her from any further inquisitions from parties less willing than I to be polite about such matters. However, we would see.

'Can you describe it for me?'

Ani swallowed. I could tell that recalling the memory was traumatic for her.

'The sirens had gone off. At first we thought it was too soon for the end of shift, though we weren't going to complain, but then we realised that wasn't what they were signalling. We all ran outside, and that was when we saw them.' Her lip began to tremble. They-'

'I don't need to know about the xenos,' I interjected. 'You do not need to describe them. The warrior is all I am interested in.'

'Don't know where he came from,' Ani continued, steadying herself. 'It was dark, for they'd come at night, but someone like that, I'd have expected to notice him before I did, if that makes sense? Our hab was only a block from the manufactorum. I'd made it home, grabbed Sev and Seddy, and we'd run

for the space port. The evac order had already been given. A great crush of bodies, all running for the shuttles, hoping to the Emperor that even if we got off-world there'd still be ships in orbit able to get us away. Suddenly the xenos were among us, and then he was just *there*. I heard a great commotion behind us and turned to see. I was expecting a xenos beast-'

'I just kept running,' Sev put in. 'Didn't look around. That's why I saw nothing.'

'A great, tall warrior,' Ani said. Her eyes had unfocused slightly.

'For a moment I thought it might he the Emperor Himself, though that was foolish, for everyone knows He's armoured in gold, and you can't look on Him and keep your sight.'

I said nothing. I'd looked upon my father's face before, although I grant you it is a difficult thing to do for more than a moment. Ani's words contained worrying traces of a belief in my father's divinity, but that was not my priority at this moment.

'What did he look like then, this warrior?' I asked.

'He was bareheaded at first, though he placed his helmet on his head after he killed the first two of the beasts,' Ani said. 'His armour was scaled, maybe blue, maybe green - it was hard to tell, for it was dark like I said, and it seemed to change as I looked. He used a great spear, and either it or the beasts he slew with it were wailing most grievously. He shouted at us to get to the shuttles, and that he would follow.'

I tensed. 'And did he?'

'No.' Ani bit her lip. 'We were barely on when the pilot closed the doors and fired up the drive. Must've been at least two dozen left outside, and the warrior amongst them. I caught one more glance of him, still fighting, as we lifted off. Then we were gone. But even though I only saw him for a few seconds, I knew he wasn't like us. He was something more.'

'What did *he* look like?' I asked. 'His face? His skin?'

'I can't describe!' Ani said desperately. 'I can see his face, or I think I can, but I can't put it to words!'

I paused, considering. Then I threw back my hood, and relaxed my gift.

Since I do not know exactly how I had appeared to Ani and Sev before, I do not know exactly how I changed in their perception. I presume I seemed to grow, but it was surely not just that which widened their eyes, saw those eyes brim with tears, and caused them to drop to their knees in wonder, or

in tenor, or perhaps some of both.

'Ani, I need you to answer me truly,' I said to her. 'Did he look like me?'

'Lord,' she husked breathlessly. 'Were you not standing in front of me here, I'd have sworn you were him.'

Gukul will never forget his first sight of me. Ani and Sev fell to their knees when I revealed myself. Ani might have been overwhelmed with surprise by the sight of someone so similar in appearance to the warrior she recalled, but her wife? Sev had never seen that being. Why was she so overcome by my true appearance?

How are my brothers and I to retain our humility in the face of such reactions? How does one live knowing that the mere sight of you can bum itself indelibly into the mind of a mortal, even one who later ascends to become transhuman, and cause them to kneel spontaneously? It is something innate to us: something my father engineered into us, deliberately or otherwise. I do not know whether He intended our natures to tap into something primeval within humans and inspire awe, or whether it was an unintended side effect. We are, perhaps, as far beyond our own gene-sons as they are beyond unaugmented mortals. Is it any surprise mortals can recognise this on some instinctual level, regardless of my father's intentions?

I have seen something similar when mortals are faced with the towering power of a Titan, one of the god-machines of Mars. But can my brothers and I truly have the same impact on a human psyche as forty metres of steel, bearing weapons capable of levelling buildings in seconds, and

powered by a nuclear core? Even Angron, even giant Magnus, cannot compare. But then again, Magnus might have the power to bring down even such a lord of war using his sorcerous gifts, and as for Angron... I cannot say that he could take a Titan down alone, but I cannot say that he would fail. I know he would try, if the need arose, and would likely relish the experience.

Perhaps it is that dichotomy within us which provokes such reactions. We are recognisably human in origin - although greater in stature - and yet we possess power even the mightiest of our transhuman warriors could barely dream of. Given the history of religions which declare that a god created humans in their own image, it is perhaps unsurprising we should tap into that part of the human psyche which seeks guidance from something familiar, yet greater.

But we are not gods. Even our father is not a god, awesome though His power might be, despite the whispers perpetrated by fools - and yes, I count my brother Lorgar amongst those fools, in this context. We are not gods. We are creations of science. And herein lies our problem, for we are neither human, nor divine.

We are flawed versions of both.

UNFORSEEN CONSEQUENCES

My own heart rate rose, mirroring the acceleration I could hear in both Ani's and Sev's chests. They were awestruck by the presence of a primarch, although they did not - I presume - know exactly what I was. I was excited at the prospect of finding another brother, but not just any brother: my *twin.* The other half of my soul, whom I had somehow known was somewhere out there in the galaxy.

Yet this twin had been left on a planet under attack from the vicious rangdan, and even the mightiest warrior could fall if enemies were numerous enough. Had he made it to another evacuation point? Had he even tried? I felt sure I would know if he had died, but I had nothing to base this on barring blind instinct.

'What planet was this?' I asked. The intensity of my expression was so great that they both quailed before me, and I forced myself to relax. 'My friends, this is very important to me. I simply need to know which planet you were evacuated from, and then I can leave you in peace.'

'Bar'Savor, lord,' Ani squeaked. 'We are from Bar'Savor.'

A location. Finally, a location. I looked up at Gukul, who nodded at me.

The memory is genuine, so far as I can ascertain. She speaks the truth.'

I suspected as much. I am a talented liar, and can easily determine the tells in others. Ani believed her tale was true with all her soul. That didn't necessarily mean that it was, but it was as close to confirmation as I could get without going to Bar'Savor and seeing for myself - which was, of course, exactly what I intended to do I drew in breath, ready to tell Gukul to remove their memories of my true appearance. It was a necessary adjustment to ensure the Imperium's security: a tale of a mighty being fighting a xenos invasion was one thing, but a tale of an identical being asking after him was quite another.

It was at that moment the micro-bead in my ear crackled into life.

'First, come in.'

I frowned. That was Skoir's voice, and the Headhunter prime was not due to contact me unless there was a problem regarding his mission.

'First here.'

'Success in primary mission parameters. Unexpected secondary societal consequences.'

I glanced at Gukul, who was clearly hearing it too. 'Elaborate.'

'Loyalist locals emboldened by witnessed deaths are seeking the cause of recidivist sentiments, and have identified external sources. They seek to 'finish the job'.'

'External sources'? Given my understanding of Volda Beta's society, that was only going to mean one thing.

The refugees.

My mind raced. We'd unintentionally kickstarted the same conflict we'd deliberately sown into the society of Trulla. There, we'd slain their leader and broadcast the results, intending to encourage rebels, or set neighbours at each others' throats as each saw traitors

where none existed. On Volda Beta, we'd assumed that removing the traitors would send their followers slinking back into the shadows too scared to raise a hand against the Imperium, but we hadn't counted on the locals taking their lead from us. Pro-Imperial sentiment mixed with hostility to the new arrivals, and the refugees became blamed for the pre-existing societal frictions.

It was a lesson to me, but it was others who were going to pay the price.

'Lord, down!' Gukul yelled suddenly, throwing himself at me. Perhaps it was his psykana senses which detected the attack before even my reflexes

could, but Gukul launched himself bodily between me and the window, just as it shattered and exploded inwards.

Grenade, gas-powered launcher, my mind filled in, even as I spread my arms to maximise the cover I could give to Sev and Ani. The force of the explosion knocked Gukul into me, and the weight of his body sent me to the floor. Shrapnel lodged into my arms and legs and back, sharp spikes of pain, but I had got off lightly compared to my psyker. Gukul rolled off me, his breath coming quickly, and howled as the metal digging into his lacerated back came into contact with the floor. Without his power armour, Gukul was far more vulnerable than he was used to.

'Run!' I snarled at the two women, who were already clawing themselves up to their feet in terror. Ani's leg had been hit and she was limping, but they fled down the corridor nonetheless.

I was unarmed. Gukul had his combat knife on his belt. We had been on an intelligence-gathering mission into an Imperial city; there had been no need to complicate matters by bringing weapons, or so I had believed. Perhaps being surrounded by my own warriors, in the middle of a war fleet which no one could bring to battle since they didn't even know it existed, had dimmed my habitual paranoia. Perhaps my arrogance had got the better of me.

'This is First,' I broadcast over the Legion's frequency. 'Suppress the riot. Reveal yourselves as Astartes. If that fails, identify and eliminate ringleaders. Suppression through fear.

'First, please confirm,' Skorr replied. *'We are to fire on loyalist citizens?'*

'They're already doing the same,' I told him grimly Now the window was broken I could hear shouting and chanting, and the chatter of small-arms fire. The refugee quarter was under attack from people who couldn't accept that the poison in their society had been of their own making, and sought to place the blame elsewhere. 'Anyone who takes the life of another Imperial citizen without recourse to the law is no longer loyal to the Emperor, no matter what they believe. If they refuse to listen to reason, send them back into hiding until the governor's troops can respond.'

'Acknowledged.'

Skorr would do it, I knew that much, but his team would not be able to get here immediately. In the meantime, I had more pressing problems to deal with.

'Gukul,' I said, rising to a crouch. 'Can you walk? Can you stand?'

'I can try, lord,' Gukul replied grimly, which was all the information I needed. No legionnaire wished to let his primarch down. For Gukul to express doubt essentially meant he knew that he could not, at least with any reliability.

'Stay down for now,' I instructed him, crawling to the window and glancing over the sill. A knot of people were below me in the darkened street, staring up at the building with hatred in their eyes. There were eight of them, brandishing weapons. I caught sight of a couple of stubbers, several makeshift bludgeons, and in the middle, the grenade launcher. It was a breech-loading affair, like an oversized shotgun, and its wielder was reloading it. Even as I watched, he pushed another cylindrical frag projectile into the breech and snapped it shut, then raised it to take aim at another window. This one would not be that of a corridor, where members of the XX legion could shield humans with their own bodies. It would be a room in which perhaps a dozen families were sheltering.

Perhaps, in that moment, I had an inkling of how Curze had felt in his younger days.

My fingers selected a shard of glass from the floor, long, sharp and wicked. I drew my arm back, raised myself up, and hurled it. It flashed through the night like a lightning bolt and buried itself in the grenadier's throat. He staggered, losing grip on his weapon, which fell to the rain-slicked street beneath his feet. Two of his companions grabbed at him, but others turned towards me, raising their guns and squinting into the falling rain.

Perhaps I should have revealed myself. Perhaps I should have jumped down from the window - for the fall would not have troubled me - and shown myself to them, relying on the awe my appearance engendered to cow them. I did not, in part because concealing myself had been my nature for so long that it was instinct, but also because of the cold rage that now burned inside my chest. These people had injured one of my Legion, and the fact they' had not known he was there meant nothing. They had stood by while one of their number had fired a grenade into an Imperial building containing Imperial citizens. The Imperium did not need their like.

I sent more shards of glass arrowing down. They were not designed as projectiles, of course, but my aim was impeccable, and the razor-sharp

edges opened throats and sliced through flimsy' robes to embed themselves internally. Wet impacts and bubbling, choking screams reached my ears as, one by one, and in quick succession, the would-be attackers fell to my improvised weapons. It was petty revenge for a being such as I to take on them, but I am not above my base human instincts at times.

I turned back to Gukul, and lifted him from the floor with no more effort than it would have taken him to lift a child. He did not protest. My Legion are pragmatic, and not given to overweening pride.

'Can you still remove their memories?' I asked him as I hurried towards Room 27.

'So long as they do not resist too fiercely,' Gukul muttered. 'It is difficult to focus.'

'I shall have to see if I can persuade them,' I said, but I paused as I drew level with the former cupboard. The building around us was erupting into panic as the people within realised that they were coming under attack, and I heard shouts, screams and the thunder of panicked feet... but nothing from within the cupboard. No fast breathing, no hammering of hearts, no hushed words from adults trying to keep their daughter calm. No scent of blood from Ani's flesh wound, although the smell of Gukul's was filling my nostrils, so that might not have been a guide.

I nudged the door open to be certain, but I was not surprised by the sight that met my eyes. Empty except for bedrolls, again. While I was dealing with the assailants outside, Ani and Sev had grabbed Seddy and made a run for it. Exactly where I did not know. I hoped they hadn't fled out into the mob.

I activated my micro-bead. 'Third, come in.'

'Third here, go ahead,' Skorr's voice spoke into my ear.

'Second is hurt, multiple lacerations to the spine,' I reported. 'Primary objective achieved, secondary objective no longer feasible. Switching to tertiary. Send one of your team to assist Second.'

'Acknowledged, First. Dispatching Fifth.'

Dercius was coming. I headed towards the stairs. Behind me, a door burst open and three refugees clattered out. Upon seeing me, they gave yelps of alarm and ducked back in. I was using my gift again, but I would still be a tall, powerful shape in their minds. Perhaps it was for the best. There was no telling where inside this building would be safe for them, and I had just

killed the hos- tiles on this side.

I bore Gukul down into the main atrium. Most of those who'd been clustered around it had fled somewhere, but the

Administratum official was still there, clutching her dataslate to her chest as though it could protect her. She was facing down the angry, shouting faces visible outside through the plex-glass panes of the doors, which had now been closed and locked. This had been a scholam, though, not a precinct or a penitentiary, and it would not take long for the windows to go through and doors to come down, should those outside decide on that course of action.

I appraised the crowd. I could see makeshift weapons here and there, but none had yet been brought to bear. Perhaps the group who'd fired upon Gukul and I had been particularly fervent, or perhaps something about the building's official frontage gave these people pause. Perhaps it was even the face of Imperial authority that waited beyond the doors that stalled them, despite the fact it was merely one woman shaking with adrenaline.

'Go home!' she screamed at the baying crowd. 'Go home! These people have done nothing to you!'

'DISPERSE, IN THE NAME OF THE EMPEROR!'

That voice was far louder, and deeper, and it thundered like a fitting accompaniment to the rain outside. The crowd turned in shock and alarm, and I saw the twin red lights of Derdus' helm approaching them through the rain. He'd turned his helmet's speakers to full volume, and the mighty lungs of an Astartes were powerful enough to begin with.

His armour was darkened, as befitted a Headhunter on an infiltration mission, and his Legion markings were dulled and concealed: not that they would have meant anything anyway to these people, or indeed to virtually anyone within the Imperium who was not themself of the XX. However, there was no mistaking his nature, and the rage of the mob subsided like wetted flames.

'DISPERSE,' Dercius thundered again. 'THESE ARE IMPERIAL CITIZENS, AND THEY ARE UNDER MY PROTECTION.' He didn't lift his boltgun, but nor did he need to. No one there was going to raise their hand against an Astartes, no matter what beliefs they held in their hearts. They fell back before his implacable advance, then turned and melted away into the night as he ascended the steps towards the door. The Administratum

official, her breath coming quickly hurried forward to unlock the door before, as she undoubtedly perceived things, Dercius simply walked straight through it.

'Thank you, lord,' she breathed, as he stepped inside.

'They should not bother you again,' Dercius reassured her, his voice now back to normal levels. His helm turned towards me as I stepped out of the shadows, Gukul in my aims.

'Pattern Delta,' I said, passing him Gukul in front of the astonished official.

He bowed his head in acknowledgement, even as he took the weight of his brother into his arms. 'Lord.'

I turned to the official as Dercius withdrew once more. Her eyes were wide, in part at the spectacle she'd just witnessed, and partly as a consequence of her recent escape from potential violence.

'Mamzel,' I said, 'did three refugees flee through those doors before you closed them? Two women, and a young child?'

'N-no, sir,' she replied shakily. 'But there are other doors, and the ground-floor windows are-'

'Never mind.' I turned and hurried back up to the first floor. I wasn't the Wolf King or the Night Haunter, but my senses were still far beyond those of a mortal. Somewhere in this city were two adults who had seen my true face, and knew I had an interest in Bar'Savor. It would have been foolish of me to assume none of my brothers had networks like mine, although I had not encountered any evidence of such. It would have been even more foolish to assume that none of our enemies did. Xenos like the rang- dan might think of humanity only as adversaries, or prey, but a race like the aeldari was another matter entirely. Those ancient, arrogant creatures were hostile to humanity's expansion and unification, and I could well believe they had us under surveillance in one form or another.

I reached Room 27 again, and inhaled deeply. Now Gukul and his wounds were no longer clogging my senses, I could smell the faintest hint of Ani's blood. I breathed in again, memorising the scent of all three humans, then set off after them. Pattern Delta meant the Headhunters should return to the *Terra's Glory* as soon as the city was suitably pacified, and await me there while I tied up some loose ends.

As it transpired, my quarry hadn't got far. They'd run from the refugee quarter, away from the packed environs of the market, and had come to rest

in a small piece of parkland. It was theoretically closed for the night, but a pair of damaged railings had allowed them to squeeze through the surrounding fence.

I simply vaulted over. It was two metres tall: no challenge.

I approached them from the south, as the two women sat together on a bench that, in daylight, would have commanded an impressive view back over much of Prime City. Seddy was between them, and was crying despite their best efforts to calm her.

They saw me coming, for I made no effort to hide. They didn't run, but I dropped my gift again anyway, to ensure they were enthralled. This would be far easier if they didn't flee.

'Who *are* you?' Ani whispered. I could smell the blood still oozing from her leg. It wasn't a bad wound, but she'd aggravated it by moving on it.

I smiled at her. 'I am Alpharius.'

'What are you?' Sev demanded shakily.

I pursed my lips. 'That is an answer I cannot give you. I am sorry it has come to this, but perhaps it is no great misfortune for you. This city is a hostile place for you, and I fear it will remain so, despite my efforts.'

'What are you talking about?' Ani asked fearfully.

'You have seen my face,' I said heavily. 'You have heard the questions I asked. I was going to take other steps to ensure your silence but those are, sadly, no longer available to me. Yet secrecy is of the utmost importance, I hope you will understand. By extension, the Emperor Himself asks this of you. Of all three of you.'

Their eyes went even wider at the mention of my father's name.

'We will say nothing!' Ani declared. 'On our lives, lord!'

I shook my head.

'I am afraid that promise will not be enough.'

'Third, come in.'

'This is Third, go ahead.'

'Tertiary objective achieved,' I reported. 'Is everything ready?'

'Aye, ready. Do you require extraction from your current location?'

I looked over my shoulder.

'No need. I'll come to you.'

PART THREE

ONE SOUL, TWO BODIES

THE LORD OF THE FIRST

It was no great secret within the Imperium that the Dark Angels were massing over Tigrun III, so it was here that I directed my fleet. We burst out of the warp on the edge of the system, far enough out for us to be scanned and our nature identified before there was any risk of engagement. The *Alpha* ran at the front of the line rather than holding back behind a screen of lighter cruisers - which was what a flagship might do if expecting a hostile reception - because I wanted the Lion to be in no doubt about our intentions. Legiones Astartes ships though we undoubtedly were, this brother of mine was mercurial, and not inclined to trust easily. I especially suspected that he would not react well to discovering there was a battle-strength Legion of which he'd known nothing.

The Lord of the First had a formidable collection of warships gathered here, the *Invincible Reason*, the *Austere Purification* and the *Spear of Thith* among them. Tigrun III had been cleansed of the rangdan, but at great cost to the Dark Angels, a pattern that was being repeated across the battlefront. Now my brother was taking stock before launching the next offensive, so this was the perfect time to interject.

It wasn't long before our presence was noticed.

'Unidentified vessels, this is the Invincible Reason *of the First Legion. Identify yourselves.'*

The Dark Angels fleet, already arranged in a defensive formation while they held council, was shifting around to target us. Not with all of their strength, however: other potential lines of attack were still being covered. No one could accuse the Lion of instantly taking the obvious bail.

I studied his formation, pondering how I would break it down if I needed to. It was an interesting theoretical puzzle, but not one to which I was able to give much time.

'Invincible Reason, this is the *Alpha,* flagship of the Twentieth Legion,' I replied over the vox. 'Well met, brothers.'

That was it. We had announced ourselves to a fellow Legion, and so, eventually, to the galaxy at large. The die was cast: now to see how it landed.

'State your business.'

I stifled a chuckle. The Dark Angels found an Astartes war fleet of a previously unknown Legion emerging out of the immaterium, and had no words of surprise, welcome or anything else. Straight to business it was, then. It seemed the Lion was not doubting our identities, but was mistrustful of our intentions.

'We bring greetings to the Lord of the First, and an offer of aid in his campaign, should he desire it,' I said. This was going to be tricky. The Lion would not react kindly to any implication that his performance was unacceptable, or that he required assistance. However, it would be far harder for me to achieve my own objectives if the Dark Angels made it clear they did not wish for us to be anywhere near them. Passing up reinforcements might seem foolish, and indeed almost certainly would have been foolish, but that didn't mean the Lion wouldn't do it if he was approached in the wrong manner.

Sometimes my brothers are fools. I doubt anyone who has had siblings has not experienced the same thought, from time to time.

There was a brief pause, and then a new voice came over the vox. I recognised it instantly. Deep, but not thunderous. Rich, but not melodious. It was my brother, the Lion.

'On whose authority are you here?'

'Our own authority, lord,' I replied. I had no intention of revealing my true

nature to the commander of the First, and so I addressed him as any legionnaire would the primarch of a brother Legion. 'We would speak with you in person, if it pleases you.'

My brother paused, but I had little doubt as to his ultimate decision. Lion El'Jonson was a mighty general, and he would want to assess this new development in the Great Crusade as soon as possible. However, he had been brought up as a knight, a noble protector of the populace of Caliban from the monsters that stalked its lands, and he was a hunter. He trusted his own senses, and he would want to inspect us himself.

'Very well. We will transmit a tactical solution to you. Array your ships accordingly, and do not cross the cordon we will set. You may send a delegation via a single shuttle.'

The vox clicked off. Armillus Dynat turned to me, incredulity warring with amusement on his face.

'They presume to instruct us in how to arrange our ships? A brother Legion?'

I smiled. *'The Lion* pressumes to instruct us. He is a primarch, Armillus, and therefore the embodiment of the Emperor's will, and his Legion are blessed to have him.'

The bridge chuckled. They were slightly nervous chuckles from the human crew, it must be said, but the humour was genuine. There was a persistent belief amongst the Legiones Astartes that those Legions who had been reunited with their primarchs were in some way more whole than those who had not. The Dark Angels would assume that was a difference between us, and they would be mistaken.

'Shall I summon the Lerneans to act as an honour guard, lord?' Dynat asked. I shook my head.

'No. If the Lion is faced with a figure of authority then he will feel the need to prove his own, primarch though he is, and that will make him cautious. We will send a ten-man squad - no specialists, no Headhunters, no Lerneans. We go to offer assistance, not to display our pageantry. Besides,' I added, 'such a display would only raise his suspicions. How can we have veterans, when we have had no engagements? All warriors should be dressed in plain battleplate, decorated only with the Legion's emblems.'

'Who will lead the delegation, lord?' Dynat asked.

I smiled at him again. 'I will, of course.'

It was a risk. Of course it was a risk. I had already been in the Lion's presence once, disguised as one of his own warriors when the Emperor came to Caliban. My brother's perceptions were razor-sharp. To go before him, to speak for my Legion, would give him ample chance to study me. There was a distinct possibility that, gift or no gift, he would realise my true nature. It might have been more prudent to let another go in my stead.

Here, perhaps, my pride won out. I wanted to look my brother in the face and see whether I could deceive him. Also, I was reluctant to let my Legion's very first interaction with another be handled by someone else: not because I did not trust the ability of my subordinates, but simply because I wanted that opportunity to be mine. I had been waiting for it long enough, after all.

However, there was a practical consideration as well. We were not, after all, merely offering the Dark Angels assistance. We had our own agenda; that fact would need to be concealed from one of the most perceptive beings in the galaxy, and I am one of the most talented liars ever born. It was time to see whether I was good enough.

The Stormbird soared through the void, thrusters burning hot as we arrowed away from our own fleet - now spreading out into the pattern the Lion had decreed for us - and towards the imposing towers of the Dark Angels warships. I opened a vox-link to the pilots.

'No need to rush. We don't want anyone to think we're making an attack run.'

'Lord, not even a War Hound would try to take on the Invincible Reason *with a Stormbird,'* one of them replied, but they throttled back a little as the rest of us laughed.

For all that I'd told Dynat I wanted no trappings of rank or seniority on our warplate, I had some of my best with me: Skorr and his Headhunter team, Ingo Pech and Thias Herzog, and two other captains, Sheed Ranko and Silonius Kel. Nonetheless, we were all clad in Mark IV power armour which looked as fresh as the day it had been made. Our weapons were gleaming, and our insignias unmarred. We were the very image of ten new legionnaires, unmarked by battle. I had debated this, and concluded it provided our best chance of success, as opposed to acknowledging our history of covert operations. I doubted my brother would have taken kindly to that.

Our pilots guided us into the hangar to which we had been assigned, and touched the Stormbird down gently onto the deck. The ramp lowered, and the ten of us marched smartly down it in two columns of five. Striding towards us, having stood back from the Stormbird's landing, was a handful of helmetless Dark Angels dressed in the black armour and pale robes favoured by their Legion. At their forefront was an Astartes whose dark plate was painted partially white, and bore rank insignias: a commander of the Deathwing, the Dark Angels' elite. We halted, and saluted with a closed fist to our breastplates.

'Welcome aboard, brothers,' their leader said. His eyes passed over us, and I saw him trying to distinguish between us. 'I am Holguin. Please, you may remove your helms.'

I smiled briefly within mine. I knew of Holguin: a Terran by birth, he might even have taken part in that historic first engagement outside the Lion's Gate. I was momentarily amused not only by the reminder of how I had fought alongside the Lion's Legion before they had even been aware of his existence, but also the thought that if Holguin was discomforted by our uniformity, the situation wasn't going to improve within the next few seconds. I smoothed my smile out, however. Holguin had a reputation as being perceptive, and I did not want my amusement to be mistaken for mockery.

I raised my hands to my helmet, and my warriors followed suit. Ten neck seals clicked, ten helmets were removed, and Holguin was left looking at somewhat less than ten different faces. Autilon Skorr had his own features, as did Dercius and Sheed Ranko; but Eitan, Hymor, Jha-Tena, Ingo Pech, Silonius Kel and Thias Herzog all wore mirrors of my own face, or as near as made no difference.

Holguin's lips pursed for a moment, but he made no comment on the similarities. He looked at me. 'Will you give me your name?'

I inclined my head. 'I am Alpharius.'

'And do you speak for the Twentieth Legion, Alpharius?'

'I do, in this context.'

I could tell Holguin wasn't quite sure what to make of that answer either, but he didn't challenge it. It was entirely plausible for a Legion to have a diplomat who would liaise with other Imperial forces - I had Autilon Skorr earmarked for just such a role - whereas a different warrior might have

command in the theatre of war. So long as ail concerned were in agreement, there would be no issues.

'Please, follow us.' Holguin turned, along with his honour guard, and began to make his way towards the large lifts set in the hangar's far wall. We fell in behind them, our bolters mag-clamped to our thighs and our hands empty. I took a moment to breathe in deeply, getting the scent of the *Invincible Reason.* It smelled similar to the *Alpha*, since there was only so much variation you could get from the stink of Storm bird fumes, the chemical tang of promethium and the ever-present, subtle undertones of metal, but there were different notes in the air. The cloth of the Angels' robes; the faint scent of their armour's unguents and lubrication oils, slightly different to the ones we used; even their flesh. Barring Holguin, they were mainly from Caliban, if I was any judge, based on the similarity of their odours. It amused me to think that although over half of my squad shared the same features, my warriors came from half a dozen different worlds. In many ways, they were far more diverse than the Dark Angels behind whom we walked.

We were conveyed to a large briefing chamber in the mid-fore of the vessel, which was equipped as a war room. I noted the decision as we entered. The Lion could have received us anywhere, and I was sure he had at least one room decked out as a formal reception room. His decision to see us here spoke of the image he wished to project to this new Legion: namely, that he was first and foremost a military commander, and that we were interrupting him. I suspected both impressions were designed to put us on the back foot.

Horus is feted as a diplomat, and with good reason, for he can be charming and persuasive when he wants to be. However, never let it be said that the Lion is without subtlety in this regard, for he too can judge his interactions with finesse. The Lord of the First is simply rather less concerned about everyone loving him.

I took in the information on the hololiths and displays at a glance, faster than any of my companions could have. They showed the first stages of the campaign, and troop distributions which I knew to be out of date. Yes, the Lion had planned this with his usual exactness, for we would have the impression of an active war room, but without being able to take anything away of value about the strength or disposition of his forces.

I only had a moment to look - as was intended - because the primarch himself turned to greet us.

Lion El'Jonson, Lord of the First, had barely changed since I'd first laid eyes on him. He was tall, and noble of countenance, with long blond hair that fell past his shoulders. He now affected short blond stubble on his chin and cheeks, but leaving aside his size, he still looked like a youth barely into adulthood; all apart from his eyes. They were cool and quizzical, and far older than the rest of his face. They locked on to me with the emotionless intensity of a targeting auspex, and I immediately felt the deceptive powers of my gift being tested.

'Alpharius of the Twentieth Legion,' he said. It was not precisely a statement, a greeting or a question. It was an opening gambit: the manner of my response would give him more information with which to assess me.

'The Alpha Legion, lord,' I replied with a bow. One of his eyebrows twitched. It seemed that gentle correction had not been an outcome he'd anticipated.

'Alpharius of the Alpha Legion,' he said. 'Alpha being an ancient Terran term for 'first', or 'primary'. You are aware you are speaking to the Lord of the First?'

'I am, lord,' I acknowledged.

'Your Legion is surely the last.'

'The last to begin operations, perhaps,' I said levelly. 'We hope to prove our worth soon enough.'

'Hmm.' The Lion's grunt was non-committal. 'Who are you, Alpharius? What rank do you hold?'

'I am one of many,' I told him, and I saw his eyes flick momentarily to Pech, to Herzog, to Eitan, and then back to me. 'I speak for the Legion in this place.'

There were some mutters amongst the other Dark Angels present, who were clearly unimpressed by my words, but the Lord of the First simply studied me. I met his gaze, more or less, trying to play the part of a legionnaire proud of his own lineage, but facing a son of the Emperor. It was no easy feat, for I felt the call of his nature to mine. We were two singular beings, greater than all those around us, and although I cannot truly say that I liked the

[ion I saw many more similarities to myself in him than I did in, say Dorn,

or Fulgrim. I felt again a yearning to drop my pretence, to greet my brother as such and to discuss all manner of matters with him openly, as an equal.

[resisted the urge. I had not acted so carefully up to this point merely to throw all my plans away simply through the tug of fraternal bonds.

'Very well,' the Lion said, after a couple of moments. 'The Alpha Legion has not been reunited with its primarch, has it?'

'No, lord,' I said. Perfectly true: my Legion had not been reunited with their primarch, since they'd had me from their inception.

'So what brings you here, with this offer of assistance?' the Lion demanded. He settled back against a cogitator bank and folded his arms.

'We are newly able to take the field against the Imperium's enemies,' I said. 'We know the rangdan to be vicious foes, although we have not faced them ourselves. How better to serve the Emperor than to help protect and reclaim the worlds that are His, and how better to prove ourselves than by fighting this foe alongside the Angels of Caliban?'

'The Emperor did not send you to me?' the Lion demanded. 'Malcador?'

I shook my head. 'No, lord.' This was true as well, since I had not sought consent from either of them. I thought I could see the line of the Lions questioning, though: he didn't want to be reinforced by order of our father, or of the Sigillite, because he was failing. His ego might be more willing to accept a new force wishing to fight alongside him due to his reputation. Also, since I had suggested that my Legion sought glory by facing the rangdan, this implied that his presence here was itself worthy of glory.

'This is a brutal theatre,' he said, 'and a thankless one. Why begin your legend here, Alpha Legion? Why not strike out for the unconquered stars, and forge your own path?'

I paused, and made a show of looking around the war room at his assembled commanders. 'Permission to speak freely, lord?' The Lion eyed me carefully once more. 'You are no legionary of mine, to be disciplined by me for speaking out of turn. Unless you intend to besmirch the honour of my Legion in some manner, what might you say that could bring censure from me?

I waited, and the Lion waved a gauntleted hand. 'Permission granted, within the conditions I have already mentioned.'

Ah, brother. I knew you couldn't resist your curiosity.

The long game brings us here, lord. An appreciation of the future, and how

it might play out.

The Lord of the First frowned. 'Speak fewer riddles, Alpharius.'

I smiled. 'Your pardon, lord. I was not sure if you had heard the rumours.'

The Lion leaned forward slightly, his expression one of ferocious concentration. 'What rumours?'

'We are the Emperor's tools in conquering the galaxy and reuniting humanity,' I said. 'It stands to reason that at some point, when the time is right, He will appoint a commander to act in His stead - a Warmaster, if you will, to take up the reins of conquest just as the Sigillite has the reins of bureaucracy.'

This was a total guess on my part. My father had spoken to me of no such thing, but I had reasoned it out. Judging by the Lion's carefully controlled expression, he had too.

'Indeed? And has the Alpha Legion heard any word as to who this commander would be?'

'One of his sons would seem the logical conclusion,' I replied. 'After all, you are his mightiest commanders.'

'Io raise one of us up above the rest?' The Lion frowned. 'We are not all found yet, if indeed we will ever be, but I cannot see an obvious candidate.'

I studied him. I he Lord of the First is not an easy being to read, even for me. I suspected I knew who the Lion would consider to

be the obvious choice, and that he was in this room, but there was very little confirmation of that on his face or in his voice.

Time to see if I could shake something loose.

'The rumours we have heard,' I said carefully, 'suggest the Lord of Ultramar.'

'Guilliman?' The Lion visibly started, an expression of incredulity spreading across his face. 'What logic leads to *that* conclusion?'

'He is steadfast and successful,' I replied. 'The Ultramarines have amassed a long list of conquests, have carved out a great region of the galaxy, and have brought it successfully into the Imperium. What is more, my lord, with your own forces engaged here against the rangdan, and Lord Guilliman's facing less stem opposition, his numbers grow to eclipse your own.'

'And my own conquests are stalled, as I reclaim worlds already within the Imperium's boundaries,' the Lion growled. 'Grinding work, more suited to the brutes of the Iron Warriors, or the Death Guard.'

And there it was. Lion El'Jonson wanted glory and recognition, and to be at the forefront of conquest. Pride and duty held him here, not dedication to the welfare of the Imperium as a whole.

'Lord Guilliman's manner of war has brought him success, but it is not one we favour,' I said. This was true as well. 'As a young Legion, we would not wish our development to fall under his hand.' Definitely true. Always seed your lies with as much truth as possible. 'If your victory here was hastened, it could re-establish your pre-eminence amongst the Emperor's sons. Should the mantle of Warmaster then come to you, we would feel more secure in our future.' Truth once more. The Lion's flexible, dynamic approaches to war appealed to me far more than did Guilliman's rigid orthodoxy. I was blending flattery with self-interest, but the self-interest was important. The Lord of the First needed to be convinced that my Legion had a good reason to be proposing this alliance, or he would suspect manipulation, and that could end in a most unpleasant manner.

The Lion neither moved nor spoke. Instead he fixed me with a long gaze, which I held to the degree I thought best given our supposed differences in standing. Even that stare from my brother caused me to question how effective my gift was. Did he see through me? Was he aware of my true nature, and playing his own game with me? I had only had the briefest of interactions with my brothers before now, for precisely this reason. The Lion's spirit was like a candle next to the raging fire of our father's, but he was my equal in many ways, and undoubtedly my superior in some, just as I was in turn superior to him in others. The company of my own warriors was in no way the same as standing face to face with a brother forged from the same genetic alchemy as me.

Finally, the Lord of the First nodded. 'Very well. I accept your offer. The Alpha Legion is hereby considered part of the Third Rangdan War. I will require comprehensive information regarding your capabilities, supply situation and manpower.'

'You will have it, lord,' I replied, with another bow.

'You will come under my overall command,' the Lion continued, 'but you will be assigned your own warzones to prosecute as you see fit. Do not let me down.'

'We will not,' I said, straightening. My brother didn't trust my Legion to fight alongside him immediately, since he didn't know how we would react

to the viciousness of the rangdan offensive. I understood his reservations: allies on whom you could not rely were sometimes worse than no allies at all. We would initially be assigned to peripheral theatres, where any failures would not result in the Dark Angels being unexpectedly cut off, or taken in the rear.

I hat was fine. I had every confidence that my Legion would surpass the Lion s expectations, and more than hold their own.

'Permission to withdraw, lord?'

Permission granted. I he Lion dismissed me with a wave of his hand, and turned back to his outdated tactical information as though we were no longer of any interest to him. Another ploy, to see how we would react.

We reacted by turning smartly and exiting the chamber, without any indication that we had taken offence. The time would come when the Alpha Legion would demand respect from their brothers, but unlike some of their fellow Legions, my warriors could swallow their pride in the name of a greater goal.

Holguin and his honour guard escorted us back to our Stormbird. He held out his gauntlet to me before we embarked, and I clasped him at the elbow in the warrior's grip.

'Well met, Alpharius,' he said to me. 'I look forward to seeing what your Legion can do.'

'Well met, Lord Holguin,' I replied, with a genuine smile. 'So do L'

Armillus Dynat was waiting for us in the *Alpha's* hangar, and he fell in beside me as I strode away from the Stormbird.

'The Lion wants a full inventory of our capabilities,' I informed Dynat. 'He's to have it - at least, for all the resources we're prepared to let him know about.'

'Aye, lord,' Dynat replied.

'I want the Legion ready to respond to my brother's orders, which we are to obey unless they are unquestionably going to lead to unacceptable losses,' I continued. 'Tailor our fighting style to best complement that of the Dark Angels, so far as possible.'

'That shouldn't be too hard,' Dynat observed. 'They're mobile and fluid, it's not like we'll be trying to mimic the Iron Warriors.'

'Pech,' I called, and Ingo Pech increased his pace to come alongside me.

'Aye, lord?'
'Congratulations on your promotion,' I informed him with a smile.
'Lord?'
'As of now, *you* are Alpharius.'

It might seem irresponsible of me to sow distrust and resentment between my brothers, but believe me when I say such matters barely needed my encouragement. Horus considered Russ a bellowing savage when they first met. Russ doesn't like any of his brothers much: I would list his particular dislikes, but I think that's still about half of us. When you consider that he's fought duels against both Angron and the Lion, and had to be talked down by Lorgar from going for Magnus throat as well, you get an idea of his temperament.

The Lion, for his part, believes he's better than all of us: Lorgar is the same, although more because of the love he bears our father rather than pride in his martial capabilities. Perturabo hates Rogal, and Rogal barely likes him any better. Few truly trust the Khan, Mortarion is dourness incarnate, and most of my brothers pity Angron, consider him positively dangerous, or both. Ferrus is arrogant, Fulgnm is worse, and Guilliman has a tendency to put the hackles of others up due to his belief that not only has he solved the problems of warfare, but that he can write it down while he does so. None of us like Curze, and he appears to despise us all, along with his own Legion.

Magnus holds a little too closely to his Legion's past use of sorcery, and that is still a division that lies between various of my brothers like a

watchful serpent. On the other hand, few have anything particularly good or ill to say about Corax: his very personality is as elusive as he is in battle. Vulkan and Sanguinius, I have to say, carry echoes of our father's own nobility with them, especially Sanguinius. He is perhaps the purest and most beloved of us.

Horus is supposedly the first, and almost certainly the brightest star of us all, but despite how we all acknowledge his command of strategy and admire his wisdom and diplomacy, there are knots of resentment. He is seen as our father's favourite, especially by those who believe that honour should perhaps be theirs, and that does not always sit well.

I sometimes wonder if I did him wrong by letting him shoulder the burden of primacy, but I took on my own burdens by making the choices I did.

BAR'SAVOR

I studied the hololithic globe map of Bar'Savor, which showed the planet as it had been under Imperial rule. So much of the data would now be inaccurate - population figures, infrastructure links and so on - but unless the rangdan offensive had altered the physical geography of the world, it should be sufficient for my purposes. 'Are you familiar with this view?' I asked.

'Of course,' Ani Nezra replied, then blanched. 'I mean, lord, I mean-'

I chuckled. 'The Imperium has many worlds, from thriving tech-hubs to primitive planets where the inhabitants think of the Emperor only as the sun in their sky. I did not know whether you would have seen hololiths of your world from orbit. Although,' I added, 'it would be appropriate for you to remember the honorific when addressing any member of my Legion.'

'I have seen it before, lord,' Ani replied. She and her wife were now serfs of the Legion, and their daughter would grow up to be the same. That was the opportunity I'd offered them on Volda Beta.

Not all of my brothers would have done the same, but I detest waste. I could not have let these people go free, knowing what they knew, and I lacked the ability to remove their memories myself. I hadn't liked the idea

of Gukul attempting it when he was in so much pain, since there was a risk he could have done damage to them, or indeed to himself, and all of my other psykers were with the fleet. As a result, I gave Ani and Sev the chance to serve the XX Legion and leave the roiling pit of emotion that was Prime City behind them. They'd taken it.

I do what must be done, regardless of the morality. Those decisions have cost lives, lives that might have been regarded as innocent. They will do so again. All the more important then, I feel, to ensure that no more loss of life occurs than is necessary. Besides, Ani and Sev were resourceful, resilient and loyal to each other and their daughter. All valuable traits, if employed in the service of my Legion.

I couldn't guarantee they would be truly safe, naturally, but nowhere in the galaxy is. However, for many mortals, the notion of being behind a Gloriana-class battleship's armour, and surrounded by warriors of the Legiones Astartes, is as close to the concept as they will ever come.

'Show me from where you were evacuated,' I instructed her, and she leaned forward to manipulate the hololith, expanding it on one of the main southern continents. A blizzard of names and designations fleeted past as the map zoomed in, until I was left looking at a huge urban conglomeration of hab-blocks and manufactoria, centred on a space port.

'There,' she said, pointing to the space port, with a finger that shook only slightly.

'Die city was called Hydana?' I asked, and she nodded. Very well.

'Thank you for your assistance, Ani. You may return to your duties.'

'Thank you, lord.' She bowed, and turned to leave, then hesitated. 'Lord Alpharius?'

'Yes?'

'I know you have your own reasons for travelling to my home world,' Ani said, her voice trembling a little. 'Reasons that are far more important than any concern of mine, but...'

'-Continue,' I encouraged her.

'Lord, those creatures killed people I knew. As we fled, I saw friends slain and devoured by them, screaming in tenor. It would comfort me somewhat to know that the Legion turned some semblance of that fear and suffering back on those that caused it.'

'It is possible the xenos are no longer on this world,' I replied. 'They may

have moved on. In truth I hope they have, for that will make my mission here easier. If that is the case, then take comfort that the rangdan are even now being brought to battle by a new Imperial offensive conducted by my Legion in conjunction with the Dark Angels, and we will exterminate them.'

She nodded heavily.

'If they do indeed still pollute this world, then it is unlikely we will be able to attain our objective without coming into conflict with them,' I continued. 'And if we do, know that I will show no mercy.'

Ani nodded again, this time with more finality. 'Thank you, lord.'

I waited until she had left the chamber, then opened a vox-link to the Navigator's vestibule. 'Lord Arachmus, can you provide me with an estimate on timing?'

There was a pause, and then the voice of Arachmus Brobantis, Navigator of the *Beta*, replied to me.

'I would estimate no more than two hours of ship's time, Lord Alpharius. The warp currents are smooth, and I can see no impending problems.'

'My thanks.' I shut the vox off, rather than engaging in further conversation. Smooth warp currents or otherwise, Arachmus was best off concentrating on his role rather than speaking with me. I opened a link to the bridge, instead.

'How may I serve, lord?' asked Captain Everedd. He had been the ships master since its construction, and was more machine now than man, grafted inseparably to his command throne.

'Lord Arachmus informs me that we will be emerging from the warp in approximately two hours,' I said, highlighting the area Ani had shown me on the hololith. 'You don't need me to tell you captain, that we might emerge into hostile forces. I am transmitting to you the coordinates identified to me as the ground party's ideal starting location.'

'Acknowledged, lord. We'll get you there.'

I changed the vox-link to reach the entire ship. This is Alpharius The *Beta* is to be at battle stations from one hour hence, and all ground parties are to be ready to deploy from that time onwards'

I shut down the hololith. It was time to make my own preparations.

We stood at the teleporter deck, clad in armour plate. I had the four Headhunters of Skorr's squad with me, as well as Akil Gukul: the Legion's

Apothecaries had dug the shrapnel out of his spine as soon as we'd returned from Volda Beta. Skorr himself had remained with the rest of the fleet, to begin his duties as Consul Delegatus, so I would act as Headhunter prime for this deployment. Ingo Pech might have taken on the mantle of 'Alpharius', but we would need more emissaries to liaise with our brother Legion, and Skorr would be one of them.

Although I had every trust in this team, I was not taking them alone. Two Stormbirds stood loaded in one of the *Beta's* hangars, ready to deploy an entire company of Astartes to the surface, along with heavy lifters to move armour. We were not here to take the planet back from the rangdan, if they still held it, but to deliver a concentrated strike to allow us to extract my brother, if we could determine his location.

Furthermore, five Lernean Terminators stood alongside us, hulking in their massive Tactical Dreadnought armour. Kanaan, the Harrower, bore a device of a three-linked chain upon his vambrace. The rest - Tronin, Lukeran, N'Hai and Taravala - had also decorated their armour with chain designs, but of a type that held meaning, except perhaps to them. Most outsiders looking for rhyme or reason within my Legion's markings would find the personal variation on established themes too confusing to understand, and would not pick up on the small details that, to Alpha Legion eyes clearly marked out which designs were and were not relevant.

Alarms began to sound: the *Beta* was about to translate from the immaterium back into realspace, which was always a unique - and rarely pleasant - sensation. I braced myself, just as the warriors and crew around me did. Even gene-forged primarchs were not immune to the disorienting sensations brought about by translation.

The ship shuddered. For a moment, just a moment, I thought I heard the same sound of scraping, tapping talons that has haunted me since my first days of conscious thought. Then we were back into the void again, and none the worse for wear.

Perhaps it was the fact I was about to go in search of my closest brother, or perhaps it was simply that I saw momentary unease on the faces of one or two of my Headhunters - and given that some of them shared features with me, it was rather like looking into a mirror. Whatever the reason, I spoke as the alarms died away.

'Did anyone else hear something?'

Some nodded, some shook their heads. 'I heard my mother's voice,' Dercius said thoughtfully.

'I no longer remember my mother,' Kanaan said, his own voice distorted by the helmet of his armour.

Nor do I, Dercius replied. 'I still knew it was her voice, somehow.' Alarms which had only fallen silent a few seconds previously began to wail again, but this time with a more urgent tone. It was the primary alert, indicating a direct threat to the ship. I had already ordered us to be at battle-readiness when we translated, so Captain Everedd would not have ordered the alarms sounded simply to bring the crew to their stations.

I opened a vox-link once more. 'Captain, report please.'

'We translated well, at the system's Mandeville point,' Everedd replied, his voice tight but controlled. *'We're not alone here, lord. We're taking evasive action, but we will be brought to combat shortly. I'm making the best route for the planet that we can, bearing in mind the enemies present.'*

I nodded grimly. 'The rangdan haven't given up their prize yet, then.'

'I can't speak to that, lord, but I've studied the information we have on that xenos filth, and that's not what we're facing here.'

I frowned. 'It's not the rangdan?' The members of my team looked at me, suddenly wary of what we might be about to meet. 'What is the foe, then?'

'I can't say, lord,' Everedd replied, just a hint of frustration audible in his tone. *'We can barely get sensor readings on the bastards, to tell you the truth, but what we can make out is unlike anything I've seen before.'*

I paused, considering our options. We were prepared for the rangdan; as prepared as we could be, at any rate. An unknown enemy of unknown strength and nature was a different proposition entirely, and one which invited caution. I was not one of my more foolhardy brothers, to charge headlong into a maelstrom and trust to my own hardiness, and that of my Legion, to win the day.

But, so far as I knew, somewhere on Bar'Savor was another brother of mine who had no Legion of his own. I was unwilling to immediately call for a withdrawal.

'Understood. Keep me apprised of the situation. We will continue as originally intended for now.'

The voice that answered me was not that of Captain Everedd. Instead, Ingrin Sevan's voice came over the vox.

'Lord, I'm on the bridge and I can see the auspexes. The captain is correct, these aren't rangdan. I think we're dealing with the slaugth.'

At that news, I blinked in surprise. 'The slaugth?'

The Maggot-Men. The Carrion Lords. Information about these vile xenos was thin within the Imperium, but there are few so good at gathering and piecing together information as my Legion, and we had built up a picture of many adversaries - or potential bled across them.

Adversaries - from the snippets uncovered by others. The slaugth were one of the instances where I almost wished I'd never stum¬ble.

I know that humanity is destined to rule the galaxy, and my father teaches that sapient xenos species are an unconscionable threat to our species' wellbeing. Some can be easily eradicated. Some can be watched cautiously, at least for now, until they inevitably demonstrate their dangerous nature or until other, more pressing threats are dealt with. Some have technological advances that surpass our own, and which can, with sufficiently judicious oversight and once their creators have been exterminated, perhaps be used for the advancement of our species. Some, such as the aeldari, can even be treated or traded with, although such endeavours are foolhardy at best and traitorous at worst. Others, like the orks or the rangdan, are simply vicious enemies who bleed us for every casualty they suffer.

I consider myself a rational being, but what I have learned of the slaugth repulses me on the most fundamental of levels. They are eaters of the dead, and each of the varied forms reported by admittedly scant sources is more horrific than the last. It was no great surprise to me that they had void-going capability, for they have been sighted in sufficiently varied locations that there was little other explanation, but we knew next to nothing about the nature and armament of such vessels.

It appeared the *Beta* was about to find out.

'Are you able to get any sort of reading from the surface?' I demanded. 'Any information about their presence or distribution there? It would make sense that those who fed on the dead would follow in the wake of a major rangdan offensive. Mad the slaugth driven the rangdan from their spoils in order to feed? Did they have some method of directing that vicious species towards the richest feeding grounds, and would then take advantage? Or were they like the vultures of ancient Terra, and simply congregated on the abandoned kills of deadlier predators to pick the bones?

'Sevan, what form do their weapons take?' I asked. This was the first time my Legion had encountered these creatures first-hand and a voidcraft's weapons are usually kin to those borne by individuals. Any information could be crucial.

'They appear to be some form of energy weapon,' came the reply. *'The readings are unfamiliar, but they've got a punch like an ogryn on frenzon.'*

The *Beta* bucked again. A Gloriana-class battleship was die greatest of the Imperium's vessels - apart from the *Phalanx* - and it was already hurt. Sevan wasn't exaggerating.

'And what of the planet?' I asked. If the slaugth's weaponry was this potent then a high density of them on the surface would mean our mission might well be suicidal.

'There are no signs of major troop movements, lord,' Sevan replied, *'but to be honest I have no idea if that's what I should even be looking for with this species. Not all of the Imperial infrastructure has ceased, either - there are still some power plants working at background levels, perhaps on some sort of automated system. It makes it hard to get an accurate picture of exactly what's going on down-'* She paused, and when she spoke again her voice held a tremor of excitement. *'Wait. I'm picking up a distress beacon from one of the active power plants. It's approximately one hundred and twenty kilometres north of the space port identified in the coordinates you provided to the captain.'*

One hundred and twenty kilometres. Not an insignificant distance to go overland when the world was being torn apart by vicious xenos killers, and then predated upon by corpse-eaters, but from unmanageable in the time between Ani Nezra evacuating d our arrival. It was entirely possible that the distress beacon had been activated as the rangdan had first descended, rather than indicating survivors desperately hoping an Imperial force would 'n to save them, but if any survivors had a way of monitoring for such things then they might have gravitated to it.

It was also possible that the slaugth could monitor it as well, and had left it in place as bait, but that was a risk I was willing to take.

'Captain, bring us as close to it as you can,' I instructed. 'Inform me as soon as we're within viable teleport range. Stormbirds, ready to launch.'

The ship shook again, and I felt more than heard the thunder of our guns responding. *'I don't know exactly what they're hitting us with, lord, but*

they've got a sting to them,' Captain Everedd reported. *'We're outmatched up here, there's no two ways about it.'*

'Can you get us close enough?' I asked. I trusted the captain, and trusted that he would be honest with me. If he said it was impossible, I wasn't going to demand that he attempted it.

'Aye, lord, I believe so, although we won't be in a good way afterwards.'

'Do it.' I turned to Magos Kunitax, who had been waiting patiently at the controls of the teleportarium. 'Magos, liaise with the bridge regarding the new teleport target - a distress beacon, broadcast from a power station.'

'Affirmative.' Magos Kunitax let out a low buzz as he engaged in electronic communication, then turned to his controls and began to manipulate them with taps and strokes of his many-jointed fingers, fast enough that even I could barely follow his actions. 'Operative Sevan has provided the coordinates. I am monitoring the possibilities of successful teleportation.'

The *Beta* shook again. I nodded in the direction of the teleport pad. 'Prepare.'

Warriors took their positions in a circular formation, and d to their centre. The ship was still shuddering, and I was beginning to grow concerned. Captain Everedd knew his business, and would inform me if the situation had changed, but all the same...

'These motherless wretches really do not like us being here, lord,' Everedd's voice came into my ear, as if on cue. *'They're throwing all they have at us. At least, I hope with all my heart this is all they have, for they're taxing us sorely.'*

'Magos!' I snapped. 'Update!'

'Teleportation still impossible,' Kunitax replied. 'The curvature of the planet is such that the desired destination is currently unreachable from our present position, and the distance is in any case too great for an acceptable success percentage.'

'Captain, how long before you have to run to preserve the ship?'

'Not long, lord,' Everedd replied grimly. *'There's no way we can stay, either. We'd have to run for the Mandeville point and translate immediately. You'd be on your own until we could return with reinforcements.'*

That wouldn't necessarily be long, as campaigns were measured: we'd made good time here, and Bar'Savor was not that far behind the front lines

of the conflict, at least in terms of warp travel.

'When can the Stormbirds launch?' If we were unable to teleport due to the planet's curvature, perhaps I would be better served by attempting atmospheric flight to the destination.

'There's no hope of that, lord,' Everedd replied, cutting down that avenue of hope. *'With the fire we're taking, they'd be disintegrated within seconds. Our shields are nearly gone as it is. Hah! Well, we've just taken one of the bastards with us, at the least.'*

'Magos?' I demanded.

'We are within maximum theoretical teleportation range for the destination, but the angle of our approach still renders the coordinates unreachable,' Kunitax responded.

I grimaced. 'Captain, a time estimate please.'

'If you want the Beta *to make it back into the warp, lord... fifty seconds.'*

'Magos, how close can you get us?'

Kunitax rotated his head to look at me, or at least point his optical sensors in my direction, without any other movement of his body. 'Lord Alpharius, your query is so vague that I cannot answer with any-'

'One kilometre error parameter for location, ninety-five per cent chance of non-fatal materialisation,' I snapped. No teleport was every guaranteed, after all.

The magos moved some dials. 'Two hundred and three kilometres from target, Lord Alpharius.'

I gritted my teeth. 'Ninety per cent chance?'

'One hundred and eighty-two kilometres.'

'Eighty per cent?'

'One hundred and two. One hundred and one...'

Those were not good odds. The sensible thing to do would be to order Captain Everedd to bum for the Mandeville point, return to my fleet, and then come back with a far larger task force, one sufficient in size and firepower to purge the slaugth from above this world, and from its surface. Perhaps I should have done that from the moment we realised that the foes we faced here were not the ones we'd expected.

I opened my mouth to order Everedd to withdraw, but something held me. The idea of someone on the planet's surface, hunkered next to an active distress beacon and monitoring the skies somehow, seeing an Imperial ship

burning hard for the planet, skimming the top of the atmosphere... and then turning and running for the cold of the void, without imparting any relief. I thought of the despair such an occurrence would impart.

I could not do that. Not to this brother, if he still lived. Even though he would not know what we had attempted, I could at least try to reach him. We would simply have to survive long enough for my Legion - our Legion - to return for us.

I had adapted to every challenge a hostile galaxy had thrown at me so far. I was not going to run from this one.

'Do it, at the eighty per cent probability range,' I instructed Kunitax. 'As soon as we are away, inform Captain Everedd.

'Compliance,' Kunitax responded, his digits already skating over the relevant controls. All around us, power coils began to pulse and glow as the teleportarium began to power up. I hoped I hadn't left it too long. At least the Mechanicum weren't ones to waste time with questions about whether I was sure of my course of action. So far as Kunitax was concerned, I would not have voiced it otherwise.

'Activated.'

The glow of the teleportarium rapidly increased to a blinding brightness, and then there was-

The sound of scraping, tapping talons, reaching out for me.

XENOS EXTREMIS

Teleportation is far from an exact art. It relies on small-scale, localised manipulation of the immaterium, and no part of that mysterious realm is entirely predictable. Even when performed under ideal conditions, things can go wrong. When activated from a warship coming under heavy fire and pushing its engines to move it as fast as possible, something is far more likely to go wrong than not. Squads can be widely dispersed, delayed for no apparent reason, or even disappear completely. Sometimes, despite all the fail-safes built in, troops can end up materialising within solid structures, leading to the most gruesome of deaths.

None of us suffered that fate, but that was because we materialised some fifteen metres above the ground.

I didn't know whether this was an error on the part of Kunitax or the equipment, or whether the magos had decided upon this course of action to minimise the chance of us scattering into ground-level debris. Whatever the reason, we fell towards the chewed up ground of Bar'Savor with - I was proud to realise - nothing more than a couple of terse curses from the Astartes with me.

There was the dull *thunk* of ceramite on ceramite as Dercius kicked out at

Gukul: a spike of sheared metal, wickedly sharp at its upper edge, reared up from the ground and could easily have impaled the Librarian as he fell. Instead, Dercius' blow had knocked them apart in mid-air, and although they landed hard on their side and front respectively, neither of them ended up atop it. Eitan, Hymor, Jha-Tena and I had easier landings, as our armour absorbed the force of the impact on our legs. The Lerneans were less fortunate: the greater protection of Tactical Dreadnought armour comes with far greater weight, and it is designed for an implacable advance under heavy fire, not acrobatics. One of them cursed again, and stumbled.

'Report,' I instructed, rising to my feet and drawing my weapons. I had once more favoured a plasma pistol and a power spear, along with a full complement of grenades, but I had raided my personal armoury and had also equipped myself with a refractor field.

'The servos on my right knee have sustained damage,' replied Lukeran, the Lernean who had stumbled. 'My armour's read-outs suggest I will not be able to keep pace with you, especially over rough ground.'

I looked around as the rest of my unit responded to confirm that no one else had sustained any significant damage or injury. Rough ground was certainly what we had to contend with for the moment, since this city had clearly been devastated by the conflict. Half-shattered buildings and rubble-strewn streets stretched in all directions. In the distance, I could see a ruined flyover, the centre of which had broken away and fallen to crush whatever lay beneath.

'Auspex?' I asked.

'Nothing of note in the vicinity,' Hymor replied, studying his handheld device. 'I'm picking up the distress beacon, one hundred point five kilometres to the west.'

Kunitax had dropped us almost exactly where he'd said he could, but we were still a long distance from where we needed to be. An

Imperial Army unit, travelling on foot, would have taken days to get there. Assuming a reasonably direct route, it would take something in the region of five hours for the Headhunters and me, and I could have outpaced them. Travelling with the Lerneans, however, would slow us considerably, especially if Lukeran was unable to keep pace even with his brethren.

It was a choice between speed and hitting power. If we encountered hostiles, the Terminators could give us an edge in combat, but by moving at

their pace, we were perhaps more likely to be engaged. Tactical Dreadnought armour is not renowned for its stealth capabilities, either.

'Can the damage be repaired?' I asked Lukeran.

'I'm no adept of Mars, lord,' Lukeran replied. 'Besides, it's in the internal workings - I would have to remove the suit.'

Another balance: take the time to attempt a repair now in the hope of improving the performance of Lukeran's armour, or push on immediately at reduced speed. Had the Stormbirds been able to land with us then we'd have had a Techmarine to assist, as well as an Apothecary, not to mention transport that would have removed the need for Lukeran to walk far at all. As it was, the eleven of us were on our own.

'We will move now, at Lukeran's best pace,' I informed them. 'However, the time may come when we must divide our forces to better achieve our goal.'

No one argued, and they would not have done even if I had not been their primarch. They all understood my logic. My Legion don t seek personal glory like some do, but they knew that at some point, any of them might need to give their lives for us all.

For the Emperor.

We had been moving through the city for perhaps an hour when we first encountered the enemy.

Hymor s auspex pinged, and we slowed as he inspected it, weapons covering our surroundings. It was no easy task: even for the vigilant machine-spirits within our Mark IV plate, there were a plethora of potential danger points to be aware of in this ruined landscape.

'There's some sort of reading to the north,' Hymor said, but I could hear the uncertainty in his voice. 'It's far from clear, though It could be the distance, or the buildings interfering with the signal. The machine-spirit's sight is often clouded and inaccurate in urban areas.'

I looked at my Librarian. 'Gukul?'

'Yes, lord.' Gukul didn't move, but I knew he would have closed his eyes behind his helm's faceplate, the better to concentrate on his mental picture of our surroundings. His psyker's senses could find the telltale spoor of sentient minds, although to do so constantly in the manner of an auspex's monitoring programme would have eventually drained him beyond

endurance.

Only a handful of seconds had passed before he jerked and fell to one knee, and I heard the noise of him retching inside his helmet. The Legiones Astartes are bred for combat and for hardship, and that is as true mentally as it is physically. For Gukul to be so afflicted suggested he had touched a truly hideous mind, and certainly nothing human.

'There,' I ordered, pointing at the shell of what had once been a medicae facility. 'Defensive positions.'

My warriors obeyed with alacrity, and Gukul quickly recovered himself and was able to make it into cover with us without assistance. We readied ourselves, our weapons trained on the junction just ahead, which was, according to Hymor's auspex, the most likely route of approach for whatever was coming.

'Gukul?' I subvocalised, using the comm-net so even the most perceptive enemy should be unable to hear my voice. 'What can you tell us? What did you perceive?'

'Horror, lord,' the Librarian replied with feeling. 'I can give you little more than that. But don't let them take you alive.'

Even with such a warning in our ears, even having seen many strange and vile things in my time amongst the stars, I was not prepared for what rounded the corner.

It appeared to be nothing more than a gigantic slab of flesh, bruise-yellow and threaded with purple, that hovered above the ground by some means which I was unable to determine. On its back was a semi-transparent bulge, which I instructed my armour's optics to zoom in on. What I made out caused me to clench my teeth in horror.

Human heads. The... *thing*... bore as a part of itself, on what I would have to consider to be its back, a sack of decapitated human heads.

'Throne of Terra,' Jha-Tena muttered in horror. 'What *is* that?'

'Xenos filth,' Kanaan growled.

'Hold your fire,' I whispered. 'We gain nothing by engaging.'

The thing continued to float forwards, its wet, fleshy surface rippling as it did so, then began to turn towards us. It had the air of an automaton, rather than something responding to external stimulus, and I had a sudden image of countless versions of this thing prowling the ruined world, looking for victims of the rangdan attack, or survivors. Presumably its vile masters

would feed upon the heads.

'Here come the rest,' Hymor voxed, and my helm's sensors picked up the clatter of metal on rockcrete a second or so before a pair of new constructs came into view. While the first xenos was disturbing, these were utterly grotesque: each moved in a skittering, hurrying gait on three legs of jointed metal that terminated in a sharp point at the bottom, while the tops blended somehow seamlessly into a pallid, stalklike fleshy body in which sat a bestial, fanged maw surrounded by whipping tendrils.

'Hold,' I whispered again. Every fibre of my being screamed at me to destroy these things, but I was not here to cleanse this world. I was here in search of one particular soul, a soul who might never be found if we were overwhelmed in combat.

The two new constructs - warriors or guards, perhaps - skittered on ahead of the larger vehicle, if such a word could be applied to something so organic. They drew level with our place of concealment, and I knew with certainty that none of my warriors had been so incautious as to make a movement or a sound, and yet the mouth of the nearest twitched around towards us.

'Hold...'

The construct launched itself at us, covering the ground towards our position with sickening speed. It was neither fast nor agile enough, however, to evade the bolter shells that buried themselves deep into its trunk, as the Headhunters opened fire. I had no intention of reprimanding them, since stealth was patently of no further use to us in this moment.

The shells detonated, blowing great chunks of flesh from the construct's torso, but although it shrieked like a wounded animal it still came on. One of its tendrils flashed out, the end sharpening and hardening into a bone harpoon as it did so, and speared through a shattered window to punch clean through Eitan's breastplate. I ignited my power spear and sheared through the tendril, and N'Hai's volkite charger deflagrated the beast the moment before its full mass hit the building, but the construct's cries were echoed as a third came into view. Neither this one nor the second leapt to attack in the same manner, however: instead they protruded bulbous metallic muzzles from within their forms, and opened fire.

I had not expected such technology from things that looked so bestial, and that was my failing. We threw ourselves to the floor as beams of bilious

green energy whipped out and raked across the medicae facility, vaporising entire sections of rockcrete and dropping more upon us as the pieces above suddenly became unsupported. I lashed out with my spear and sliced apart a chunk of column that had been about to crush Hymor.

Grenades! I ordered, and my Headhunters obeyed, hurling venom spheres through what remained of our cover towards the slaugth constructs, but the explosives by themselves drew whistling shrieks. The blast ceased momentarily, and in that moment I had no idea whether the toxic crystal shards would trouble enemy.

I made my move.

I dived out of the shattered window through which Eitan had been struck and hit the ground rolling, then came up and smote the nearest warrior with my power spear, a two-handed strike using the greatest reach of the haft as though I was wielding an overlength axe. Grotesquely powerful though the construct's weaponry was, its body offered little more resistance to the disruptor-edge of my weapon than did the air itself, and I carved through it diagonally to leave it severed in two parts.

Pincer-tipped metal tendrils erupted from the sides of the harvester construct, for so I had to think of it, as it became aware of a potential target for its function. It began to float towards me, but I ignored it for now in favour of the other warrior, which was already scuttling sideways to get a better line of fire.

Dercius followed me out of the ruined building, his bolter aimed at the warrior. Two rounds struck it and blew away chunks of flesh but, as with its fellow, the construct survived long enough to fight back. It fired its beam weapon, and the energy struck Dercius.

His armour blistered away. He had enough time to begin to scream, and then his flesh followed in kind.

Such power was astounding, but I didn't let it slow me. I was moving before the ruined corpse of my Headhunter had hit the ground. I sprang upwards, landing atop the harvester construct and severing with my spear a tendril that reached for me as I ran down its length, then fired a bolt of plasma from my sidearm that burned a hole clean through the warrior construct. It howled again, but now staggered drunkenly, and I vaulted off the harvester to bisect it as I had its companion and put an end to this. Behind me, I heard the roar of volkite chargers as the Lerneans engaged the

harvester now I was clear of it.

A bolt of savage green energy struck me from my left while I was in mid-air. My refractor field turned the blow, but the force of the impact knocked me sideways into the rubble of a destroyed building next to the medicae facility.

I twisted out of the tumble it had sent me into and landed on my feet, then leaped out at the construct that had killed Dercius and sliced it in two with a single blow of my spear on the way past. I had landed again and sent a ravening bolt of plasma at the being that had struck at me before I had even registered its true nature.

One of the Maggot-Men was here.

It was tall, closer to three metres than two, with two arms and what appeared to be two legs beneath its dark, hooded robe, but any similarities it might bear to humanity vanished once you saw its exposed flesh. Its hands - in one of which it clutched a corroded sceptre - were both masses of maggots, and where the face of a human would be was simply a blank mass of writhing worms.

It was repulsive, but it now had a hole in its torso the width of my arm, where my plasma pistol had burned clean through it.

Unfortunately, this appeared to trouble it not at all.

It raised its sceptre, and green energy played around the staff again. I sprang to one side as it fired the strange weapon, by a means I could not discern, and I heard a hissing sizzle as a section of wall past where I had just been standing was reduced to dust by the beam. I had no intention of chancing my refractor field against the slaugth's offence a second time, for such devices were temperamental at best.

To my left, the harvester had suffered horrific damage, but it clearly lacked pain receptors since it ploughed into my warriors anyway. The Lerneans hacked chunks of it loose with their power axes, but it continued to fight. Its tendrils seized Jha-Tena and yanked him towards the fanged maw that abruptly opened up within its mass. He fired his bolter on full-auto, and a power axe severed one of the appendages grappling him, but not swiftly enough to prevent him from being plunged head first into the harvester's form. There was a grisly snapping noise as the xenos construct's razor-sharp fangs severed the neck seals of his armour, and then his headless body was tossed carelessly aside.

The horror and distraction of witnessing such a spectacle cost me, for the slaugth lashed out at me again with its weapon. This time my refractor field did not activate, and although my reflexes were sufficient to ensure only a glancing hit, I could not prevent the energy beam from striking the right side of my chest as I threw myself downwards. The ceramite of my chestplate burned away in that millisecond, and the energy tore into my flesh.

The pain was excruciating. Although I had been burned before, by fire and by acid, this was as though the very molecules of my body were being ripped apart. I dropped my spear as my flesh burned away down to the bone and agony suffused my arm, but even such xenos-spawned foulness was not enough to completely incapacitate someone created by the Master of Mankind, and I fired back. The slaugth was inhumanly fast and swayed aside from the shot, although the plasma bolt took off its right arm halfway up. It seemed to pay the injury no mind, and charged towards me as I staggered back to my feet.

A hail of bolter shells erupted from my left as Hymor and Gukul opened up. The creature somehow flattened its body to slide under the shots, stretching out towards me and then snapping upright again before even I could properly react. I tried to bring my plasma pistol to bear on it, but its damaged right arm reformed and seized my wrist to force it upwards. It swung for me with its sceptre and I blocked its arm with mine, yelling in pain as the impact jolted my abused flesh, and managed to grip its wrist with my right hand in the same manner as it had hold of my left. However, the xenos was obscenely strong, and I was injured. Its flesh writhed under my grasp, and I struggled to keep hold of it. Then my helm began to flash warnings at me, at the same time as smoke started to rise

from my gauntlets. The slaugth was exuding some form of caustic fluid from its own body, which was eating away at the ceramite. It would reach my skin in a matter of moments.

To my horror, the thing made a sound that was an approximation of a human chuckle.

'Time to die, meat thing,' it hissed in a voice of mucous and rot, speaking mangled but recognisable Low Gothic. 'I will enjoy your flesh.'

ONE OF MANY

I could feel my body starting to regenerate, as my father's genecrafting came to my rescue once more, but it wasn't going to be enough. Resilient though my brothers and I are, we are not immune to pain, and with the flesh of the right side of my chest still reknitting over my bones, I could no longer match the xenos for strength. I felt the thunder of the Lerneans approaching, but I was unsure what they could achieve. Even plasma barely damaged this creature, let alone hurt it. I wasn't sure if power axes would achieve much more than splattering acid over my warriors' armour.

Then I heard a howl of anguish which I recognised as Gukul's voice, horrendously distorted though it was, and the slaugth stiffened. It stopped fighting me for a moment.

A moment was all I needed.

I wrenched my arms free and dropped my plasma pistol from my left hand into my right, then snatched a krak grenade from my belt with my left and lashed out with a punch. The speed and force of my movement was so great that instead of knocking the slaugth backwards, my gauntlet plunged into its chest.

I activated the grenade, withdrew my hand, and dived side.

The slaugth staggered, but its body was already reforming over the wound. Gukul's scream cut off abruptly and the slaugth appeared to come to its senses, then turned towards me with its sceptre raised.

The grenade detonated, and its entire upper body came apart. Even the hideous biology of the xenos could not survive such trauma. Pieces of it flew in all directions, and its lower body crumpled to the ground. I shook myself, trying to dislodge the parts of its flesh that had landed on me, and which were already beginning to smoke as its caustic fluids ate into my armour.

'Lord, are you hurt?' Kanaan called.

'Yes,' I replied through gritted teeth, rising back to my feet. 'But I will live. Check on Gukul.'

The Librarian was prostrate on the ground, his legs twisted under him where he had fallen. Hymor undid the neck seals of Gukul's armour and removed his battle-brother's helmet, revealing a face twisted in the after-effects of agony, eyeballs rolled back and blood leaking from his mouth, nose and tear ducts.

'No vital readings from his armour,' Hymor reported grimly. 'It's as though everything shut down at once.'

I nodded sadly. 'He attacked the slaugth's mind to buy me a moment to act. Given his reaction when he'd merely touched its presence earlier, he must have known what the cost would be for him.

I felt no guilt, merely gratitude, even though I quite possibly owed Gukul my life. My Legion is pragmatic. Losses are acceptable, if they are within the mission parameters. My gene-sons will give their lives for each other, if that will be of benefit to our goals. They will give their lives for me. I would give my life for them, but of course, the circumstances in which a primarch's life is more expendable than that of an Astartes are rare indeed. The day might come when that would be the case, but here and now, it was not.

Such are the brutal calculations of war.

'Rest well, brother,' Kanaan murmured, and the rest followed suit with similar benedictions. Hymor was still with me, as were all the Lerneans, except Taravala, whose body lay impaled by metal tendrils next to the dissolving form of the harvester construct, hacked |umps by his power axe, and those of his fellows. Dercius had been killed by a warrior, Jha-Tena had

been decapitated by the harvester, and although Eitan had wrenched out the bone-tipped tendril that had pierced his chest, I could tell from the readings his armour was giving me that even his enhanced physiology was not coping with the wound. It was a matter of time for him, now.

'Do you suppose we have drawn further attention?' Kanaan asked.

'I consider it likely,' I replied, and pointed at the slaugth's sceptre. 'I do not know whether another party would be within earshot, but it is inconceivable to me that these creatures could possess such technology but not have some ability to communicate over distance. We must assume that it alerted others of its kind.'

'Go on, lord,' Eitan said. His voice was hitched with pain, but he was determined. 'My time is limited, but while I draw breath, I will stay and provide a welcome for any of the xenos who come here in search of us.'

I will stay with him, Lukeran added. 'Speed is clearly your best weapon, lord, and I would slow you.'

I didn't waste time arguing: their suggestion had tactical merit, instead I reached out and clasped each of their forearms, one after the other, in the warrior's grip. 'Thank you. Die well, if you have to.'

'We will, lord,' Lukeran replied grimly.

The rest of us moved on as fast as we could for another half-hour, leaving the city behind and and reaching an area of wild scrubland. Here the three remaining Lerneans broke off northwards, for Tactical Dreadnought armour, and the Cataphractii pattern in particular, was not built for speed. It galled me to use such elite warriors as a distraction, but since the surgical insertion I had originally intended had not been possible, we now had to use the resources available to us to the best of our abilities. Kanaan, N'Hai and Tronin would attempt to buy us more time by lumbering around noisily and obviously, two things Terminators excelled at.

That left Hymor and me, and we pressed on eastwards towards Hydana at the best pace we could manage. The grass beneath our feet was a shade of purplish green, and the slender, twisted grey trunks that rose to spread their branches above our heads bore a greater resemblance to a woody fungus than to the noble trees that stood in the Sigillite's Retreat in the Imperial Palace. Brightly feathered avians chattered to each other, or were startled into flight as we ran past.

'There is plenty of life,' Hymor noted. 'Should we expect to encounter the slaugth here as well?'

'We believe they prefer to feed on the flesh of intelligent beings,' I replied, 'but we cannot be sure of anything. However, that barely matters. I suspect there will be more picking the bones of Hydana.'

It took us four hours to reach the outskirts of Hydana, but here our pace had to slow once more, for now we were at greater risk of discovery. Instead of running through brush, dodging around tree trunks and leaping over watercourses, we slunk forward through the lengthening shadows as Bar'Savor's sun began to dip below the horizon.

I checked the readings from my helm. Although I now lacked a pauldron and half my chestplate, the communications functions were still working properly. The distress beacon was a steady, flashing icon in one corner of my vision, and the directional reading suggested we were a mere three kilometres away from it.

There, Hymor said, raising his hand to point at a collection of ghty chimney stacks and cooling towers rising into the eastern sky. 'That must be it.'

I've checked the signal reading, and cross-referenced it with the distance information provided by the targeting matrix within my helmet. 'I agree. Route?'

Hymor pointed towards a series of low power pylons, visible through gaps between other buildings. 'It appears that a rail transit line runs towards it, perhaps one block north of here. Judging by the height of those pylons, it runs in a cutting, which would help shield us from hostile eyes.'

'And leave us in a kill-box if we're discovered,' I pointed out, but his plan made sense. With any luck, the slaugth and their constructs would be combing the streets and hab-blocks looking for their grisly sustenance, not prowling the city's industrial arteries. There were no certainties here, merely our best guesses.

We picked up the transit line without incident, and ran along it past abandoned engines, carriages and goods trucks. Some were torn apart and knocked off the rails; others stood untouched, as though simply waiting for their next load of passengers or cargo. It wasn't long before a tunnel mouth loomed ahead of us. I'd have expected it to be dark, but instead the internal lumens were glowing steadily. Of course, Sevan had said that some

infrastructure like power plants were still operating, perhaps on automated servitor systems or the equivalent. Those systems would eventually degrade without oversight from enginseers, but in the short to medium term, there was no reason why they might not continue.

'Any readings from inside?' I asked Hymor, who shook his head.

'No, lord. But in a tunnel such as this...'

'I understood: the auspex would be of limited use here. Very well, we'll take our chances.' I paused, and increased the volume of my helm's audio inputs to their maximum with an eye-blink command. 'Quickly, and quietly.'

It was so faint that not even I could be sure, but I thought I'd heard the skittering scrabble of pointed metal legs from somewhere above and behind us.

The tunnel ran roughly north-east, in a long curve. The distress beacon's signal was cut out by the layers of rockcrete above our heads, but I had memorised its location, and was able to keep track of our distance and bearing in relation to it as we ran. However, we were not alone.

'I hear something behind us,' I told Hymor. The tunnel's air was cool on my exposed skin, fresh and new after it had regenerated from the slaugth's vile weapon, and the sensation made me feel vulnerable. Primarch though I was, I had already seen ample evidence of how the xenos' weaponry could pose a threat even to me.

'Leave me, lord,' Hymor replied immediately. 'Run as fast as you can. If they catch me, I'll do my best to delay them.'

'For the Emperor.'

'No, lord,' Hymor replied. 'For the Legion.'

I accelerated, for this was no time for sentiment. It was only a handful more seconds before the tunnel's uniform lighting was marred by a green flash from behind me, and I heard the hiss of part of the wall's cladding dissolving into dust. A bolter boomed, bringing inhuman roars of pain, followed by a titanic series of explosions which could have only been Hymor's entire armoury of venom spheres going off at once.

I could see the darkness at the end of the tunnel, as the lumens overhead gave way to the open night sky of Hydana. I would emerge within a few hundred metres of the power plant, and the blinking distress signal. I had no idea if I would find human survivors, or it overrun by the slaugth and their creations, but at least I would reach it. I might also find my death, but I

realised that this prospect held no fear for me. I had done my best to find the being whose spirit called to mine from across the stars, and I could not have been satisfied had I delayed. Perhaps my Legion would learn from my recklessness: at the very least, they had learned more of the slaugth, and I had confidence that I would be avenged.

two spider-legged shapes dropped into view, along with a tall figure in a flaPPin8' ragged robe, and my spirit sank. The xenos bastards had got ahead of me.

Hymor's bolter roared behind me again, but then another flash of lurid green lit up the tunnel, and his scream was both agonised and quickly truncated.

I was alone.

I ignited my power spear and raised my plasma pistol, fighting down an unfamiliar sensation of despair. I might win this fight, fearsome though these adversaries were, but I suspected that more and more of the xenos would be drawn to me as a result, and I still might not reach my destination. Even primarchs have their limits, and this son of the Emperor would be lost to the galaxy before it had even learned my name. My only consolation was that I had trained my Legion well: through them, my legacy would live on, and the Imperium would have its protectors.

I was about to fire, pre-empting the green glow that began to swell around the slaugth's staff, when I saw a new figure approaching the xenos and its minions from behind. For half a moment I took it to be another one of the creatures, but although large and bipedal it was not dressed in their customary robes. More importantly, I could read the speed and angle at which it was running.

It was attacking.

I shifted my aim at the last second, firing a bolt of plasma that incinerated the rightmost warrior construct just as it was beginning to turn towards the sound of approaching footsteps. It collapsed in a frenzy of thrashing legs and dissolving flesh, but I had no time to admire my handiwork, for the slaugth opened fire at me. I threw myself into a flip that took me wide of the beam, and when I landed I fired again at the other warrior construct, destroying that one as well before it could join the attack.

The slaugth, readying its weapon for another shot, abruptly spun to engage the new figure.

It was of a height with me, I could tell immediately, and was

dad in a suit of amour that flashed as though made of reptilian scales. It wielded an immense, double-ended spear, with which it thrust and cut at the slaugth so fiercely that the monstrous xenos could only fall back, parrying as it did so.

With that threat contained, at least for now, I turned to check behind me. Advancing around the tunnels slight bend were two more warrior constructs, leaking ichor from bolter wounds, but still functional. They howled as they detected me by some means, and that familiar, bilious green glow gathered in their midsections.

I blew one apart with my plasma pistol, but the sudden whine emanating from it immediately afterwards told me that the plasma coil, a famously unstable device, was rapidly overheating. I had a burgeoning explosion in my hand, and one enemy left to kill.

I threw the plasma pistol at the last warrior construct.

I didn't beat it to the trigger, quite. My weapon was perhaps a metre from it in the air when it fired, catching the plasma pistol in the beam. The resulting explosion imprinted itself on my retinas for a second, and not only disintegrated the construct, but began to bring down the ceiling above it too.

I turned back to the other conflict, and saw the slaugth deliver a point-blank blast of green energy that knocked its adversary backwards to collide with the tunnel wall with incredible force. The slaugth raised its weapon once more.

I hurled the power spear this time.

Just as it had against the Grand Overlord of Trulla, my blade punched into its back. Unlike him, the slaugth did not keel forward onto its face, but it did stiffen, and let out a gurgling sound of pain.

I he armoured figure flowed back to its feet, its armour somehow undamaged by the slaugth's energy blast, and swept its own spear in a diagonal slash. I he blade seemed to howl, and the wound it carved through the slaugth vomited oily black smoke. The xenos fell, bisected, and the armoured figure stabbed it in the head for good measure.

I approached cautiously. The enemy of my enemy is not necessarily my friend, and there are any amount of creatures in the galaxy who exist in a mockery of humanity's form. It was possible that my apparent new ally was not human at all. In fact, I suspected that was the case.

But then again, nor was I.

'Thank you for your aid,' I said, as I reached them. The armour's helmet - a baroque visor, crested with rearing serpents - turned towards me, but although they still held their strange spear, they did not raise it towards me.

'And you for yours,' they replied. Their voice was as deep as my own, and curiously unaccented. 'I have not yet met a warrior who can slay even one of these fiends' constructs by himself, let alone four. Truly, the Legiones Astartes are even mightier than this world's legends give them credit for.'

'You know of the Astartes?' I asked.

'By reputation only.' The figure reached up and removed its helm, and I found myself looking into a mirror. 'I am Omegon.'

I had never felt such joy. No victory, no celebration, no praise from my father had ever sparked within me the same rush of euphoria I experienced in that moment. Finally, after decades of searching, of yearning for something I only partly understood, I had it in front of me.

'Well met, brother,' I said, disengaging the seal on my gorget and lifting my own helmet from my head. 'I am Alpharius.'

HYDRA DOMINATUS

'I could feel your existence, of course,' Omegon said to me. We were in a control room in the bowels of the power station, in which he had been hiding, and from whence he would venture out to search for supplies and kill any slaugth he encountered. 'I had always assumed it was the soul of the one who made me, but now I see my error.'

'You knew you were created?' I asked. I studied his face. It was such a strange sensation, after being surrounded by my gene-sons who had embraced surgical alterations to resemble me, to see a face not my own that mirrored mine *exactly.*

'I possessed a high level of innate deductive reasoning,' my twin replied, 'sufficient to realise that the ruined device from which I'd crawled seemed an unlikely method of natural gestation.'

I laughed. 'What world was this on?'

'I do not know its name,' Omegon said, slightly wistfully. 'It had been settled once, but the civilisation had died. Despite my best efforts, I was unable to determine how, or even what they called themselves. I was the only sapient being on the entire planet, so far as I could tell. It wasn't until pirates landed, looking to pick the ruins, that I was able to take to the stars

and escape it.

'Did the pirates not tell you its classification?' I asked.

Omegon glanced at his weapon, which he called the *Sarrisanata*. 'They were not in the mood for conversation, or for passengers, so I never got the opportunity to ask.'

I nodded in understanding.

'I was able to make short warp jumps using the ship's navigation charts, and slowly began to find my way towards systems inhabited by humans,' Omegon continued. 'I heard rumours of the Imperium, and the Emperor. Given the stories about Him, I felt certain He would have been the one who created me. I arrived here, hoping to find answers, but I'd barely set foot on this world when the invasion began.'

I leaned forward eagerly. 'Your ship is warp-capable?'

Omegon laughed bitterly. 'It is, or at least it was. However, I surmised that arriving in close proximity to an Imperial world in a ship previously crewed by a group of piratical degenerates might cause hostility. The freelance asteroid-mining vessels in the outer belt are less discerning, however, and I was able to approach one of them to barter for passage to this world. My ship may still be out there, but we would need to get past the xenos in orbit to get to it, and the shuttle I have here would not survive such an attempt.'

'You have a shuttle?'

'The facility has one. Whether it was intended for emergency evacuation or routine transit I'm not sure, but the workers here didn't flee in it.' Omegon looked around pensively, and I became aware of the stains on the floor. 'From what I can tell, they died defending their stations.'

'So we have a method of getting into orbit,' I said.

We do, my twin replied. 'Should we be able to survive until these beasts have finished their plunder and move on, we might be able to see whether anything is left in orbit that can take us farther afield. At the moment, however, it will do us little good.'

I smiled at him. 'Perhaps it is time for me to tell you *my* history…'

I spent the next eight hours telling Omegon everything, and please understand that when I say 'everything' I am a being with almost perfect memory and an eye for important detail, and my twin understood the concepts I was explaining almost before the words had left my mouth. I did

not even have to explain twice the methods I had learned to hide my thoughts. I was giving him my observations of the XI Legion when I broke off, aware of an intrusive noise.

'They have found us,' Omegon said immediately, flowing to his feet, replacing his helm and snatching up the *Sarrisanata*. 'Stay behind me. Your armour is already damaged.'

I was not too proud to obey my twin's instructions as I activated my power spear. 'Where did you find such wargear?'

'The planet on which I landed,' he replied.

'You do not know its origin?'

'It is a mystery to me.' He spun the spear and drew a slight wail from it, as though the air itself was being cut by its edges. 'I consider the provenance of a tool to be of secondary' importance compared to its usefulness.'

I grinned. 'I agree completely, brother.'

The far door burst inwards, and a veritable swarm of warrior constructs poured in.

Omegon moved to meet them, but he could not hope to stand against them alone. His blades severed flesh and metal with ease, and his armour shrugged off their weapons, but he would have been bowled over and subdued by their sheer mass had I not been there.

But I was there, and I fought with him.

We moved as one - back to back, two heads, eight limbs and two spears - and we killed wherever we turned. Omegon would move to intercept a blast intended for me, or punch the *Sarrisanata* backwards to impale one about to assault me on the side where my armour was incomplete; I would cut the legs from under one seeking to flank him, or spear to the ceiling one attempting to leap over me and take him down from behind.

When he turned, I shifted with him. When I swung, he ducked. Any other two warriors fighting in such close proximity would have inevitably impeded each other, perhaps even impaled each other, but we fought as one soul in two bodies. Each of us was complete at last, and the constructs were no match for us. They died in their dozens, until eventually there were no more to kill.

We were both breathing hard. I could hear Omegon's exhalations. They were in time with my own.

'I can see now why some of our brothers so relish combat,' I remarked. 'It

is a different experience when you are whole.'

A bubbling shriek echoed down the corridor that led to the control room.

'And now the masters come,' Omegon said grimly. They are cowards, once they realise you are their equal. I suspect they knew of *my* presence before now, but considered me too dangerous to bother with. They must have gathered in numbers for that to have changed.'

I amplified the auditory sensors in my helm again, and listened. Wet, heavy footsteps, the low hiss of voices as they spoke their own foul tongue: the echoes made it difficult to be sure, but...

'A dozen of them, at least,' I reported.

Omegon s helm turned towards me. 'They are far more dangerous foes than their beasts. I doubt I could best that many alone.' He paused. 'Still, with you fighting beside me... They don't work together or coordinate their attacks, we might be able to-'

I have a different idea, I cut in. 'Can we reach the shuttle you spoke of from here?'

Omegon moved to the other door at the rear of the room and cracked it open, then listened. 'Yes, unless there are some this way as well, lying in wait in silence. But we would simply be swapping likely death down here for certain death in the sky.'

'No death is certain until it occurs,' I told him. 'And with us, who knows? Lead on, brother.'

'As you wish,' Omegon replied, and so we fled from the slaugth. Yes, we fled. Guilliman would perhaps have referred to it as a 'tactical withdrawal', but semantics are for historians. We might have been mighty primarchs of the Imperium, but we withdrew instead of offering a battle that might have ended us. We fled.

Then again, if Roboute had known of this event, and known it was me involved, perhaps he would have described it as fleeing after all.

Omegon led me towards the roof, with the cries of our pursuers snapping at our heels. They seemed disinclined to follow too closely, however, perhaps expecting an ambush, or wary of how we had destroyed the first wave of their attack. As a result, when Omegon pushed open a hatch atop the last ladder and we climbed out into the night air of Hydana, we were not fighting for our lives.

My twin walked to the edge of the building and looked down. 'On

reflection, I feel your plan might have been the wiser one I joined him. Far below, yet more of the slaugth's hideous creations were scuttling or floating towards the power station. The attrition would have ground us down, without question.

'Then let us depart,' I replied, and we ran for the shuttle, left on a small landing pad on the north-eastern corner.

It was not a design familiar to me - presumably a holdover from Bar'Savor's pre-Imperium days, kept around since it was still functional - but the controls were logical enough: there are only so many ways in which the human brain can conceptualise and communicate data relaying to flight, after all. It was little more than a skiff, with a two-seater cockpit and a bay behind in which perhaps a dozen regular humans could have stood or sat. I powered it up and checked the wellbeing of the machine-spirit, while Omegon stood on guard at the bottom of the ramp with his spear in one hand and my last two venom spheres in the other.

'Here they come!' he shouted, just as the engines began to whine. A moment later I heard an explosion as one grenade detonated at the top of the ladder, then another more muffled one a couple of seconds later, as he expertly lobbed the second into the confined space below.

'We've got power!' I shouted back. 'Get on board!'

I heard his footsteps running into the bay, and I fired up the thrusters before the ramp even registered as closing. It didn't stop my twin from reaching the co-pilot's seat, as we took off from the rooftop and left the slaugth in our wake.

Or at least, the ones on the planet. I could see why Captain Everedd had been so confused when we'd arrived, because the readings I was getting back from the scanners were indistinct and diffuse, but there were still definitely ships above us. They didn't seem to be altering their orbits to intercept us yet, but we'd only just taken off. There was still plenty of time for them to do so, and we were in an unshielded, unarmed, virtually unarmoured craft that was little more than a flying transit carriage.

'What are your intentions?' Omegon asked, as we climbed rapidly through the blue until it began to darken into the inky darkness of space. 'Stick close to the flank of one of them, so they dare not shoot us down?'

I checked the chrono in my helm again. 'I doubt we'd make it that close - nor do I particularly wish to find out what surprises their vessels might be

able to deploy at that range.'

'A fair point,' Omegon agreed.

'No,' I continued, 'I will avoid them for as long as I can, and have faith.'

'Faith?' Omegon's voice betrayed his sudden uncertainty. 'You spoke of how some have declared the Emperor a deity - you never said you shared this belief.'

'I don't,' I told him. I eyed the scopes. The blurs indicating slaugth ships were beginning to shift. Clearly, our ascent had been noticed. I didn't know what sort of range or type of weapons they bore, but they had been sufficient to give a Gloriana-class battleship a great deal of trouble. If they landed a hit, they would obliterate this shuttle in an instant.

'Then in what do you place your faith?' Omegon pressed. 'Fate?

'Destiny?'

Something flickered into view on the scopes: not a tenebrous slaugth ship, but the hard-edged return of a human vessel, an Imperial vessel. I smiled. It seemed that my calculations of how long it would take for reinforcements to arrive had not been greatly in error, even allowing for the inconsistency of the immaterium.

'The Legion, brother.'

Additional warp signatures resolved, one after another. A twentystrong battle group, led by the *Beta,* had come out of the warp at the Mandeville point and was now burning at maximum speed towards Bar'Savor. I do not know how the slaugth navigate the warp and what preparations they require for it, so I do not know whether they chose to fight or simply had no opportunity to run. Whatever the reasoning, we immediately ceased being of any interest to them, as they turned to meet the oncoming assault.

Many against one, they had overwhelmed the *Beta.* One on one, they would have given many of my ships a stem test. This, however, was fleet warfare, and the xenos had no chance against the precision strikes and group tactics of my Legion. They fought viciously, but independently, and they were exterminated one after another.

We would not be retaking Bar'Savor today: that would lead to too many questions, when our combined offensive with the Dark Angels reached it. We could, however, teach the Carrion Lords a lesson that would stick with them - and, while so doing, allow one small shuttle that had fled the planet to take shelter behind, and then dock with, the *Beta.*

'Come, brother,' I said to Omegon, as the readings indicated that the bay had repressurised. 'It's time to meet your warriors.'

It is fair to say that spirits were high on the *Beta* when we translated into the warp in the aftermath of the fight above Bar'Savor. Not only had the xenos fleet been crippled, and Kanaan and Tronin survived for long enough to be teleported back aboard, but the legion had a second primarch. This was a source of much amusement, given that the Dark Angels thought we had none and yet we now had twice the number they or any of the others had. However, as we withdrew to the chamber that had been hastily set aside for my twin's use, Omegon seemed pensive.

'You spoke at great length of your history so far,' he said, when I asked him about his mood. 'But you never said that our father mentioned me.'

'He did not,' I replied. 'He referred to twenty 'sons'. This is my Legion, but we are one soul, you and I, albeit in two bodies. Therefore this must be your Legion as well, and we must have nineteen brothers. I believe al) of them will be recovered, in time. Each found so far has ascended into greatness on their home world, no matter how harsh the conditions there.'

'How can our father not know of *me?'* Omegon demanded. 'He created us!'

'Just because He never spoke to me of you does not mean He does not know of *you,'* I told him. 'Our father keeps secrets. Some of them I know I am not privy to. I have no doubt there are many others, the existence of which I have no idea about. I have kept myself secret from my brothers in order to be the sword in the darkness. Perhaps you were kept secret from me because he intended you to fulfil the same role without *my* knowledge.'

'I do not like that line of reasoning,' Omegon muttered. 'Let me present you with an alternative.

'I'm listening.'

'When we were scattered, we must have been done so through the warp.' He saw my quizzical glance. 'It is the only known manner in which objects could have been moved so far, so quickly.'

I nodded. 'Agreed.'

'We do not truly understand the warp,' Omegon continued, 'but it is not like the material universe in any way.'

'The Navigators refer to it as the Sea of Souls,' I put in, and my twin nodded.

'Indeed. What if, when we went into the warp, there was only one of us, but when we came out...' He gestured between himself and me.

'You are suggesting that we were duplicated in some way?'

'Duplicated, split.' Omegon shrugged. 'I have no certainty, merely guesswork. But I know that you are a part of me. As you say, we are one soul in two bodies.'

I sat back. 'That would mean our father did not know of you. That no one knows of you, outside of the Legion.'

Omegon nodded. 'I can think of uses for that fact, even once we reveal ourselves.'

I smiled. 'When *we* reveal ourselves?'

'You intend to keep me secret from our brothers? Our father?'

'Or you keep *me* secret from them.' I shrugged, mirroring his earlier gesture. 'The Alpha Legion will need their primarch to be visible publicly, at some point. Half of them look like us anyway. One member of the Legion is the primarch. All the others are just one of many.'

Omegon smiled. 'So when does one of us get himself discovered?'

'Neither of us can pass as an infant, to grow up and dominate a society as our brothers have,' I said. 'We could do as you did, and approach the Imperium - or perhaps find a system far from the Crusade's front line and rise to prominence there, albeit as an adult. I would like to find and vet the rest of our brothers first, before either of us is known. I suspect we have plenty of time to prepare.' 'If we cannot ascend as a child, why not descend upon a civilisation as a warrior god?' Omegon suggested.

I shook my head. 'No gods. I don't trust them. Even if it's me.' 'And how is that working out for the Imperium?'

'Lorgar is a fool,' I said firmly. 'He refuses to heed the statements of the very man he claims is divine! If I didn't know better, I would suspect he only wishes our father to be a god so he can lay claim to a manner of divinity for himself.'

Omegon studied me. He clearly found it just as odd as I did to watch his own face move and react.

'So which brother do you think we should reveal ourselves to, when the time comes?' he asked.

I considered. 'I think there is an obvious choice. Based on what I have told you of the ones I have encountered so far, what would your instincts be?'

Omegon didn't hesitate. 'Horus.'

I nodded. 'Horus.'

'Then we are agreed.' Omegon sat back. 'But from what you tell me, he is extremely perceptive. You've laid eyes on him before. I have not. When it is time, I think I should be the one to meet him, to ensure the more genuine reaction.'

I smiled. 'Fair enough. But I would love to see it.'

Omegon smiled back. 'Don't worry, brother. I'll tell you all about it.'

EPILOGUE

The crew of the *Vengeful Spirit* are slow to react. Too slow.

My intrusion is not discovered for some time, since I did not arrive via boarding pod or a similar hull breach. There is no rampaging squad of Legiones Astartes murdering their way through the decks, simply one warrior slipping from cover to cover, far more aware of the layout of a Gloriana-class battleship than anyone could expect. I know Horus has his strategium on the bridge, even though I've never set foot on this ship before, and I know how to get there.

I'm halfway there before a deckhand sees me as he hurries from one post to another. He gapes and panics, for I am an imposing figure in my scaled armour, and in any case I am taller than any of the Luna Wolves he's used to. He tries to turn and flee, but I seize his head and break his neck with a twist of my wrist. His misfortune, to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Perhaps it's callous, to condemn a man to death in order to enact our deception on our brother, but I'm also highlighting the weaknesses in Horus' defences. If he has any sense, which I know he does, then once my work here is done he will ensure it will never again be so easy to board the *Vengeful Spirit*.

I ghost on, using my gift as much as possible, for my twin and I share all things, including the ability to conceal our true nature when necessary. I deflect attention, becoming a strange shadow in the corner of someone's vision, or a figure whose presence they accept when they see me but who they cannot properly recall once I'm gone. Who has time to chase phantoms when the ship is at battle alert, and the enemy are proving themselves frustratingly tenacious, despite their lack of capital ships and numbers?

The two Luna Wolves guarding the entrance to the bridge, however, are not so easily deceived. They are alert, and my gift merely prevents them from opening fire on me immediately. They can tell something is wrong, even if they can't define exactly what, and they bark challenges as I approach. I do not reply, but merely break into a run.

That's enough for Horus' warriors. They raise their bolters, and the hail of fire they lay down should stop an enemy in their tracks, but I am not any enemy. I am a primarch of the Emperor, although they do not know this, and wherever their bolts are, I am not.

Then I am between them, and the twin blades of the *Sarrisanata* - or the Pale Spear, as my people have taken to calling it in the decades since I began my deception - have decapitated both of them at once. A more grievous loss than the deckhand, to be sure, but my brother is at risk of feeling overconfident within his void-borne fortress. He must be refocused.

His guards did not secure the bridge door in time. I open it, and rush through.

It is more ostentatious than the bridge of the *Alpha*, or the *Beta*, or indeed any ship in my fleet: my true fleet, that is, not the ragtag group of ships currently dying at my bidding outside. It is in no way given over to design before functionality, but the eye is automatically drawn to its commander. Horus Lupercal, clad in his Terminator armour, is already looking at me even as his bodyguard move to attack.

I see his face for the first time in person, and note the similarities to my own. We are not twins, but there is enough of a likeness in our brow and our jaw that it might be inferred we were brothers, even if we were not both genetically engineered super-beings, created to conquer the cosmos.

Horus cannot see my face, of course, for it is hidden behind my helm. He turns slightly to seize his power sword, by which time the first of his four bodyguards are upon me. They are in Mark IV plate rather than the

Terminator armour worn by his Justaerin, and none of them bear the rank markings that would denote them as members of the Mournival. Good: killing his elite, or his closest advisors, would not be the best way to ingratiate myself with the brightest star in the Imperiums constellation.

The first Astartes raises a bolt pistol, and loses his arm. I thrust one spear head through the chest of the second, throw him into the third, then duck into a whirling move that spins the Pale Spear above my head and takes off the heads of the fourth and the one-armed first. The third is on his front and tries to rise: I place one head of my weapon at the base of his neck.

'Hold!' barks Horus, and I pause to look up at him. The face of the primarch of the Luna Wolves is not thunderous, not wracked with choler. Instead I see delight spread across his features, even while it mingles with sadness at the deaths of his gene-sons. However, this is a warrior who accepts that death is a part of war, and I can tell that he views this discovery to be worth the price paid.

'Brother!' Horus booms, spreading his arms. I lift my spear slightly, feigning the confusion of someone who witnesses his adversary addressing him in such a manner instead of attacking. In truth, I am indeed a little overwhelmed as Horus approaches me. My twin spoke to me of the tide of Lupercal s charisma, the fire of his spirit, but I was not truly prepared for it. He is a being

of power and purpose, and in that moment I understand why warriors follow him so joyfully, why foes flee before him, and why the conquered consider themselves liberated.

'At long last, my final brother is found!' Horus declares, and there are tears of joy in his eyes. 'Lay down your weapon, brother! You are among friends! You are with your family!'

'Who are you?' I asked, and my voice is somewhat hesitant despite myself. It is not just mummery.

'I am Horus, known to my warriors as Lupercal,' Horus replies. 'I am the primarch of the Luna Wolves, and the first-found son of the Emperor, Master of Mankind. And I am your brother.' He shakes his head slightly, as though unable to believe what he is witnessing. 'What is your name?'

I raise my hands and remove my helmet. The slight gasps from around the bridge as I look Horus in the eye tell me that the similarity of my features to his has been noted.

'I am Alpharius.'
This was a lie.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mike Brooks is a science fiction and fantasy author who lives in Nottingham, UK. His work for Black Library includes the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Rites of Passage* and *Brutal Kunnin*, the Necromunda novel *Road to Redemption* and the novella *Wanted: Dead*, and various short stories. When not writing, he plays guitar and sings in a punk band, and DJs wherever anyone will tolerate him.

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